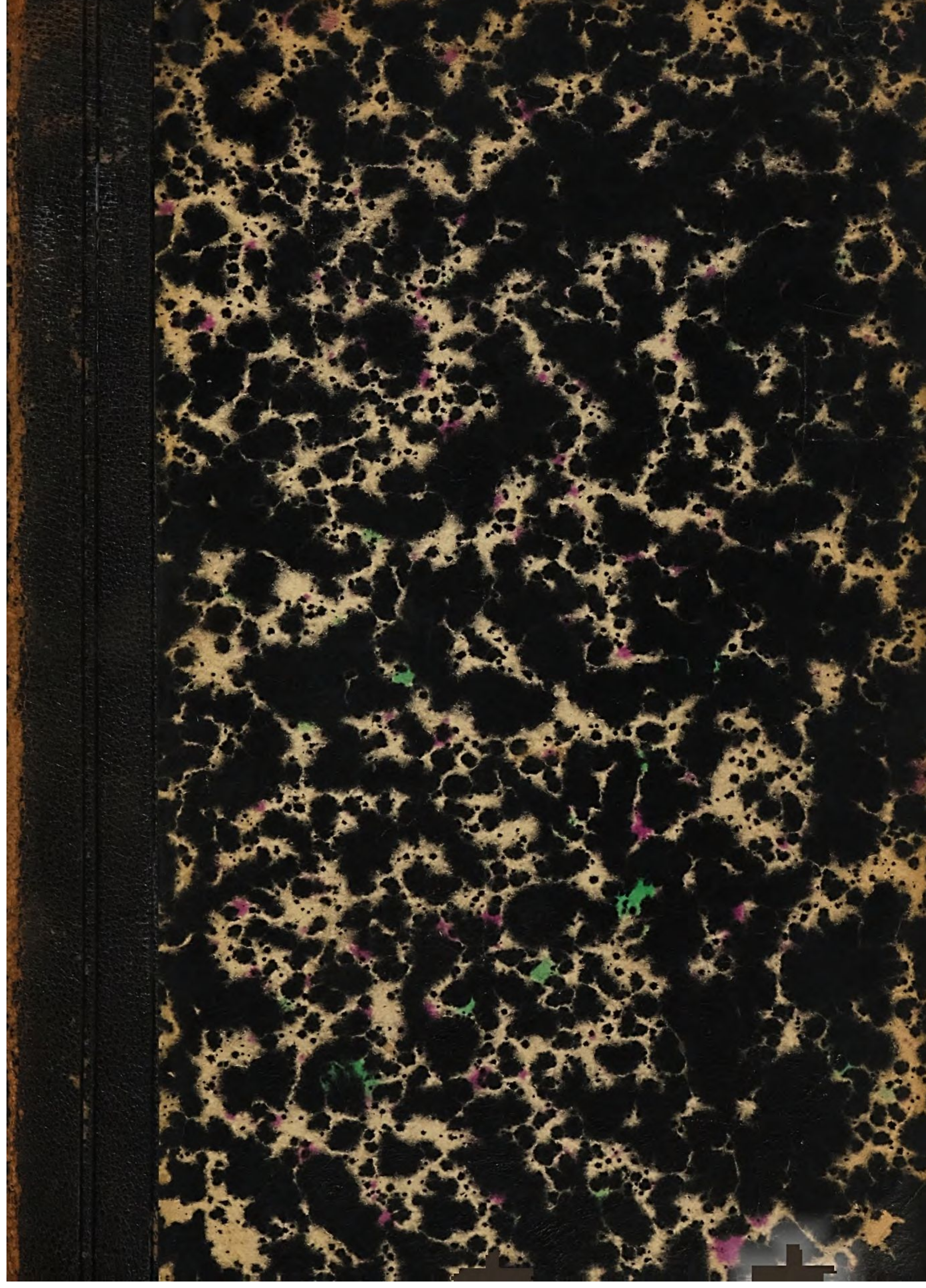




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BY

JAMES PAYN.

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. 2.

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BY
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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.



A STUMBLE
ON THE THRESHOLD.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1893.



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A STUMBLE ON THE THRESHOLD.

CHAPTER I.

A WARM WELCOME.

PERHAPS it is not to the advantage of the successful candidate for University honours that, at an age when the majority of young men are seeking for employment and the means of livelihood, he is placed above such anxieties for ever. It seems somewhat ridiculous that by the gaining a college Fellowship, all necessity for work on the very threshold of adult life is done away with; and no doubt it has encouraged that lethargic indolence which, under the fine name of "lettered ease," is so often the attribute of the college don. He is like the poet of the Seasons,

who never left his bed till the afternoon, because there was no reason why he should do so. At the same time, for the young gentleman himself the position is a very agreeable one.

Except for that hopeless attachment of his, which, for the present might be said to be in abeyance, George Needham, as he stepped into the train that summer morning, bound for his friend's house, might be termed a happy man.

The perils, the dangers, the voyages were past,
And his ship was moored in harbour at last.

and that, too, after a voyage of very short duration. Moreover (which did not happen to the gentleman in the ballad) he had not got to go to sea again. The bleak and bitter days of poverty—dependence—the early struggles, his colourless usher life at Langton, the patronage of Dr. Jones's daughters—were over; he was a free man, as those depressed by penury, whatever they may boast to the contrary, can never be. This transformation even affected his appearance. He looked less like the Dr. Johnson of Ella's fancy; less like an old-young man;

altogether different in expression from the geological student with whom Blythe had first made acquaintance on the Barton sands. In those days—only a little removed from the times when barristers were forbidden to go by stage coach, as being *infra dig.*, and had to club together to take post-chaises—it was thought a little low for members of the University to travel second-class. (They now travel third-class as often as not, but we are not prone to forget the old trammels of convention, and how they galled us.) But as a matter of fact Needham had never been in a first-class carriage before; and even that position of superiority—vulgar and unimportant as it seems to us—was a new experience for him. Let grandeur sneer “with its disdainful smile,” and philosophy with its prouder lip, as they may, at the record of this contemptible fact; but there is a good deal of human nature even in the finest characters, and it may be well remembered (if only as an example of its universality) that the venerable sage of Chelsea speaks with bitterness of persons who went about in broughams (before he kept one himself,) and that the wittiest divine of our

own time acknowledges to a very decided flutter of satisfaction on first setting foot in his own carriage. The very country, as the train whirled Needham through it, had a different aspect from that which it formerly presented to him; for the eye, as has been truly said, only sees what it brings with it; and all that we behold is tinged unconsciously by the mood in which we regard it. The brightest sunshine, the heaviest showers, are those of our own smiles or tears. London as he passed through it, seemed no longer that "City of Exigency" which he had once painted it; he had often thought to himself, "when my scant means have come to an end, and I have failed at Cambridge, it is hither that I shall probably come, but in what humble capacity? What shall I find to do? How shall I support myself? Must it again be by tuition (an appalling thought to one who had been a school usher) or could I make ever so little money by my pen?" In youth we are said to be full of dreams of ambition. A few of us may be so; the majority, however, are more tormented by the thought "How shall I live?" than "How shall I distinguish myself?" This had been Needham's case; now

that he had no necessity to put the former question to himself, how different it made the outlook! In other days he had bitterly reflected how indifferent was Nature to human woe; but now she seemed to sympathise with its weal. As "the light wind blew from the gates of the Sun" it seemed to congratulate him upon his prosperity. As he drew nearer his destination the scenery through which he passed became picturesque, the line skirted the Thames already bright with its summer argosies, skiff and canoe, and gaily painted house-boat, all which were new to him.

At the station Blythe met him with a victoria; there was also a cart in waiting for his luggage, but of that fact he was fortunately ignorant; his one portmanteau was put beside the coachman and they whirled away.

"I am delighted to see you, old fellow," said his host warmly.

"I am sure I am very glad to come," replied Needham; the swift passage through the green coolness of the leafy lanes, the country scents and sounds, the sense of quiet happiness on every hand, enchanted him.

"Well, you ought to be happy because it's a visit of charity. I told you Stretton was dull, but I dared not tell you how dull it was. There is absolutely nothing to do."

"Who can want to do anything down here? It seems to me one could dream for ever amid such scenes!"

"That is because it's your first acquaintance with them. The introduction to the country in summer time is always charming; the second day you don't think so much of it; the third day your one desire is to get back to town."

"But I don't live in town," replied Needham, laughing.

"Still, even at Cambridge, you have people to speak to, and you are not quite sure what they are going to say; but here you are quite sure. That's Doctor Rushout," here Blythe nodded and smiled at a man on horseback. "If we had been so imprudent as to stop, he would tell us that something or other had 'broken out' in the village—I should like to 'break out' myself, like the women in goal; this vegetation is intolerable."

"It seems to have pulled you down a little,

my dear fellow," and indeed it had not escaped Needham's notice that his friend was thinner and paler than of yore.

"Yes, I do find it rather trying. Everybody else, however, who is not in Rushout's hands is in rude health. They bore you with an energy and vigour that would be impossible if they were not very strong. 'How *are* you?' That's old Hardacre; he drives himself in that mail phaeton all day long."

"But did he not want to stop and speak to you?"

"Of course he did; did you not see me point to you and shake my head, in token that I could not do it; the rights of hospitality are still respected in the country, and a guest is a sacred thing; but for you that old man would have talked to me about the new park paling that he is putting up, by the yard; I recognised it in his eye, where I have seen it many times before. Do you know the difference in cost between wood and wire fencing? If *I* don't it's not his fault. Don't you let out that you are mathematical, or he'll make you work it out for him. 'A fine day. Glad to see you out again!' that's

Mrs. Osborne, the parson's wife, in her basket-chaise—washing-basket, old Hardacre calls it. The poor lady does not come up to sample as regards country looks, does she?"

"No, indeed! What's the matter?"

"Well, Rushout calls it 'nerves.' If *he* had had twelve children, and an irritable husband to look after half his life, he would call it by another name. To see Osborne with my mother is one of my few amusements. He wants her to give up the family pew and get the church reseated, because he says in the house of prayer there should be no distinction of classes. 'My dear Walter,' says my mother, after these interviews, 'that man is an incendiary.' Here's the lodge; that's a pretty peep of the river, is it not?"

"It is indeed," said Needham; there were many such peeps across the park; charming glimpses of the silver stream, revealed by judicious lopping of the foliage. "How can you call it dull, with the river with all its attractions at your very door?"

"The river, my dear Needham, after the second day, is as dull as ditch-water. Be so

good as to admire the portico of our house; my mother is very proud of it; in the daytime it is rather risky to drive under it, but on party nights, when the Jehus are all drunk, it is a test of coachmanship, indeed. Whenever Ella's ponies come to the portico she says 'Her heart is always in her mouth,' from which, as I told her, it is clear that Grey had not got it. Well, here we are at home, and welcome."

It was Blythe's custom to "run on," as Mrs. Martin called it, saying whatever came first into his mind, but it struck Needham that he was, on this occasion, even more thoughtless than usual, or rather that he rattled on to avoid thinking, that he was excited, and, though not artificial (for that was contrary to his nature) strangely hurried in his manner of speech, like one who rides at speed for fear of stumbling. It was curious that with one he knew so well, and with whom he was so completely at ease, he should thus behave; but, though as genial as of old, and obviously pleased to see his guest, there was certainly something amiss with him. For the moment, however, this made little impression on Needham. The first sight of any place, in which

we are about to dwell, if only for a few days, always claims one's attention. The entrance-hall was of vast size, and furnished, though very handsomely, in a queer fashion. The general tone was mediæval; men in complete armour stood on either side with various ancient weapons grouped upon the walls between them; lances with pennons projected from above.

"Wardour-street!" observed Blythe, drily, as he noticed his guest's inquiring looks. All round the room were desks, and chests, and boxes of old oak most curiously carved, which Blythe informed him had been purchased by his mother from farm-houses and the like in her travels; upon them were placed curious jars and pots of china ("the ugliest that could be got for money," said the enthusiastic exhibitor) full of bright and brilliant flowers, the odour of which scented the cool air; while the rest of the furniture was entirely modern and comprised the most comfortable lounges and deck chairs, with a suggestion of a siesta in every one of them, and the most accommodating legs and arms conceivable.

"These were my contributions to the establishment," remarked the host; "my mother's

motto is 'Swell-dom' and mine is 'Comfort,' and thus we combine our tastes. You won't find her in this room," he added, leading the way into a splendid drawing-room, "nor yet in the next; her habit reminds me of the line in the ballad of Lord Bateman, used to signify the extent and vastness of his lordship's castle, 'And away, and away, and away went he.' She always receives in the Throne chamber, as I call it, which is about the fourteenth. I hope the walk will give you an appetite for the tea-cakes."

It was not the fourteenth room in which Mrs. Blythe was seated in state, but it was the fourth, and quite far enough to go for the spectacle. This was nevertheless gorgeous enough. The rooms, which were arranged *en suite*, were furnished in the Louis Quatorze fashion, with an amount of gilding that would have sufficed for the dome of St. Paul's. There were clocks enough on the mantelpiece to have chronicled time for all eternity, though, fortunately for the ears of the visitor, the majority (as happens with clocks of that era) did not go. The ceilings were illustrated with allegorical pictures of the heathen mythology, and, so sure as ever you tried to run

—or even walk—and read them, you came down on your nose, for the floors were of polished oak. Here and there a bear-skin, or a Persian rug, or a strip of costly carpet like a rivulet of print in a meadow of margin, afforded a shelter—after the manner of the London crossings—for the timid wayfarer, but the path to Mrs. Blythe's presence was as slippery as that which is fabled to lead to the Temple of Fame. How the footmen with their trays of tea and coffee ever arrived at their destination without a catastrophe in china was a problem that never failed to exercise Needham's mind. The hostess, looking not a day older than she had been at Bournemouth, nor indeed for twenty years before that, herself resembled some piece of Dresden china, delicate and hand-painted, as she greeted him, without rising, with her stereotyped smile.

"Glad to see you at Stretton, sir; I congratulate you on your tutorship, or whatever it is; I do not doubt that Walter would have similarly distinguished himself, had there been any need."

"I am afraid not, mother," put in Blythe, smiling.

"Well, well, let me think so. The Blythes

never have failed in anything they have undertaken. You take both sugar and cream? Quite right. Rushout knows nothing about it, when he calls cream unwholesome. It's good for everything, I tell him, including the complexion."

"If the Doctor ever tried it with that view," observed Walter drily, "he has a right to denounce it."

"I can recommend the tea-cakes," pursued the old lady, without noticing this interruption, "because we make them at home. Those tea-cakes at Bournemouth—but let us talk of nothing disagreeable. Have you heard of late from your friends the Martins?"

Needham flushed to the forehead. He had not expected any allusion to the Martins, and even this casual and indifferent reference to them put his wits to the rout.

"They do not correspond with me," he managed to murmur, "nor has Grey done so for a long time."

"Oh, indeed. Then you are in Mr. Grey's black books, like ourselves, it seems."

Needham looked so utterly at sea at this,

that even Mrs. Blythe, who did not much trouble herself with the expressions of those with whom she conversed, took notice of it.

“Well, I do not know what is the matter with him if he has not taken offence at us, but he has not honoured us with his presence at Stretton for a long time. We have, fortunately, other friends who think it worth while to visit us. Indeed we are fortunate in our society. Mr. Hardacre is a near neighbour. The Draytons are within what I call dinner distance; so are the Southbys. And they are all county families, which of course makes it very pleasant. There are no *nouveaux riches* and very few *parvenus* in the neighbourhood, and it is such a comfort to know that one’s friends have, at least, a grandfather.”

“If you are not bent upon ruining your digestion with more tea-cake, we will take a stroll in the garden, Needham,” observed Blythe, abruptly. “I hear wheels at the front door, which probably means a county family, and they are more in my mother’s way than mine.”

“He is a naughty boy, Mr. Needham,” said the old lady, shaking her jewelled finger at her

son, "but he was always shy with visitors, so I suppose I must let you go."

Blythe had already effected his escape through one of the open windows, and Needham followed him, nothing loth.

CHAPTER II.

WALTER BLYTHE'S "FUN."

THEY were now in a large garden, full of exquisite beauty, and separated from the park only by a wire fence. It was a spot to linger in for half a summer's day; but "We shall be seen from the windows by those terrible visitors!" exclaimed Blythe, and led the way to a raised terrace on the south side of the house, commanding a still more extensive view of wood and river. Here he selected two comfortable garden chairs, drove off with a handful of gravel a couple of peacocks who came up with insufferable airs of vanity to be admired, and produced his cigar case. "Now this is jolly enough," he said in a tone of toleration; "but for these county families life in the country on a day like this would be very tolerable. They are the 'fetish' which my dear mother worships, and they demand great and cruel sacrifices."

"I daresay they are a very good sort of

people," observed Needham, laughing, "though I know nothing about them."

"Unfortunately, I *do*. They *will* call in person instead of dropping their cards, and driving away to do it somewhere else; that is the usual society game in town, and does nobody any harm, but in the country even the best people are behindhand. Their talk is not 'of bullocks,' like that of the farmers, but entirely of their uninteresting selves; how Lady Betty is going to be married, and Sir John has suffered from the depreciation in land; of their patronage of the poor; and how this or that park or hall has been bought by 'some horrid manufacturer.' What there is to admire in such people I can't conceive. One wonders how the cult of them first arose. It is a pity that neither Darwin nor Herbert Spencer have given their attention to it. Why should people be worshipped because from generation to generation they have been content to vegetate on the same spot? What can it matter to any human being that another human being possesses the portrait of his grandfather? If the old gentleman were alive he would probably be insufferable."

"The gardener Adam and his wife smile on the claims of long descent," quoted Needham.

"Of course; and *our* gardener hates them. But for the county families we should never have had those infernal peacocks, which do more harm to the flower beds than all the rabbits. Every old country house with a terrace must have peacocks; it is a sign, not of gentility, but of the very reverse of it—of long descended wealth and station. Their screeching brings on my mother's neuralgia, but, though she will not have a barn-door fowl within a mile of the place, she submits to it without a murmur. I tried to persuade her that among the nobility peacocks were a dinner dish, but she says that, however that may be among parvenu peers, the Blythes have never eaten their peacocks. What is worse than all, the worship of this class causes the few really nice and intelligent people who come to settle amongst us to be depreciated. The Martins, for example, who are worth all the county families about here put together, are quite looked down upon. At Bournemouth, where she knew nobody else, my mother was very friendly; but here in her own place, she is barely civil to them. Such

behaviour, of course, only excites their contempt, but still it is most deplorable."

"Then, that is, I suppose, the reason why Grey keeps aloof. I can easily imagine that he would resent any slight shown to his friends, and especially to his betrothed."

"Oh no, it isn't *that*," replied Blythe, with a queer smile. "To do him justice he does not see it; he can't imagine that people can be such fools—let alone the insolence of it—as to suppose the Martins are inferior to anybody."

"Besides, since they are not here now, why shouldn't he come?" observed Needham.

"Just so! Now, what do you say to a stroll down to the river?"

Needham could not but observe that his last question had not been answered; but there was something in his friend's manner that forbade him to pursue the inquiry. He felt more convinced than ever that there had been some quarrel between them.

Their way led through "the Arcade," an addition to a garden almost peculiar to Stretton; it was one gigantic arbour, though closed, of course, at neither end, extending for nearly a quarter of

a mile, and affording a most agreeable promenade in sultry weather; the chequer work of light and shade made its path a thing of beauty, while over-head the fiercest sunshine was mellowed and mitigated, by the long arch of foliage. Here and there were benches with corresponding openings, through which were the most charming views set in the leafy screens like a picture in its frame.

“What a delightful spot,” exclaimed Needham, as they arrived at the first of these benches.

“Yes; the arcade is thick enough to keep out a shower, so it is ‘equally enjoyable in wet or dry,’ as the advertisements say of the tea gardens. This is Ella’s favourite seat.”

The familiarity of the speech was unwelcome to Needham, not so much in the use of the young lady’s christian name, which was Blythe’s way—he was accustomed to speak even of Miss Lintern as Penelope—but in the manner in which it was pronounced. If he had been Ella’s brother, or her betrothed, he could not have alluded to her with greater freedom.

“She has not been at Stretton very lately, I suppose,” said Needham; there was a coldness in

his tone, and even a suspicion of implied rebuke, but the other did not seem to perceive it.

"No," he answered, indifferently. "They came to wish us good-bye before they started for the Lakes; and that is the last we have seen or heard of them, or indeed of Grey either," and again a smile played upon Blythe's lips, very different from that genial one it usually wore.

"Where is he at the present moment" inquired Needham.

"Oh, at his own place, I suppose; Myrtle Cottage on the river, close to The Fishery, 'the Martins' Nest' as I call it, where his aunt and cousins live. Pretty lovey-dovey names, are they not?"

"They are very pretty names," said Needham; and, as he spoke, he uttered an involuntary sigh.

"Upon my life I believe you are in love with her yourself," cried Blythe, with a sudden burst of laughter. It was not loud laughter, but if it had been the bursting of a bomb shell it could hardly have startled Needham more. Blythe had drawn his bow at a venture, and, indeed, was hardly conscious of having placed an arrow on

the string at all, and yet it had gone home, into his companion's very heart.

"I don't think you ought to make a young lady, whom we both respect, the subject of that kind of joke," answered the other.

"But, by Jingo, it seems it isn't a joke," said Blythe, looking at him intently. "Why you're blushing like a girl, my dear fellow. I do assure you I had no more notion of there being anything serious—I don't say between you and her, for I know there isn't—but in your own mind with regard to Ella, than of my being elected a Fellow of St. Boniface."

"But there is certainly nothing serious, nor anything at all," protested Needham, vehemently. "Indeed, how could there be, when, as we both know, she is engaged to Grey?"

"That sentiment does you honour," observed Blythe, sarcastically, "but is, perhaps, a trifle too complimentary to human nature. Love laughs at engagements as at locksmiths. They are like subscriptions to creeds; when we make them we are bound by them, but we cannot prevent our views from changing. You would not have a man remain a parson who has outgrown his be-

lief in the Church; then why insist upon a girl's keeping an engagement of which, in her heart of hearts, she repents."

"I am quite certain Ella Martin does not repent of *her* engagement," observed Needham, gravely.

"I am certain of only a very few things, and I am not sure that that is one of them," answered Blythe drily; "but, whether she does or she doesn't, I stick to my text. No girl can predict what her feelings may be six months ahead. She may think No. 1 the very man who has been created especially to be her husband; but then she has not seen No. 2, about whose creation for that purpose she may be still more convinced."

"But, it seems to me, these views of yours are equally applicable to married women."

"No, certainly not equally, though they may be still applicable. When a woman is married, she generally gives up all idea of No. 2, and, even if he presents himself to her notice, fails, or pretends to fail, to recognise his special fitness for her. When you have once started by the parliamentary train, you may wish you had come by the express, but you stay where you are, and you

make the best of it. While you are still on the platform, and the same idea strikes you, you *can* change."

"Still, some people have a sense of honour," remarked Needham.

"No doubt, though it's often a mistaken sense. I am not thinking of any particular case, remember, which always prevents the proper consideration of general principles; but, surely a woman who declined to break her word to No. 1, even though she preferred No. 2, would not only be sacrificing herself, but No. 1 also; it would be like the oath of Herod, more honoured in the breach than in the observance."

"My belief is that a proper-minded girl, who is engaged, would no more permit her thoughts to dwell upon No. 2, as you call him, than if she were a married woman."

"That would be so in the case of what is called 'love at first sight,' no doubt. She would not, as I have said, if she were married, recognise No. 2 as a possible lover at all; nor, even if only engaged, would she so recognise him at first; but as time went on, and opportunity was given, No. 1

would gradually sink in her estimation, and No. 2 would rise."

"Then, according to your theory," said Needham scornfully, "there would be a point when their specific gravities would be equal, and the young lady would be in love with two gentlemen at once."

"Well, of course. Why shouldn't she? We men are often in love with two women at once, and, for that matter with half a dozen."

For a moment Needham looked up at his friend with indignation depicted on his countenance, and an expression which seemed to say, "Pray speak for yourself, sir;" but the humourous smile on the other's face disarmed him, and he burst into a roar of laughter.

"I acknowledge," he exclaimed, "that you took me in. I ought to have remembered that it has been said of you, that you knew the laws of gravity but did not obey them; it is foolish indeed of any one to take you seriously about anything."

"I am afraid I am rather frivolous," answered Blythe. "Grey used to say that I was not fit for genteel society unless mitigated, and that I should

only be admitted to it when accompanied by a couple of clergymen."

It was clear to Needham that the other had been in joke all along, and he was glad indeed to be convinced of it. That phrase "Grey used to say," however, troubled him; it seemed to suggest that all sayings of Grey as regarded Blythe were over; that they were never again to be the friends they had been.

"We have just time to stroll down to the river before dinner, old fellow," continued his host.

"But *have* we time?" replied Needham, with some anxiety. "It is all very well for you, who have only to jump into your clothes, but I have my portmanteau to unpack."

"My man will have done all that for you."

Needham thought to himself he must be a clever man if he had, since the portmanteau was locked, and it had never struck him to give up the key; but the idea of his having been guilty of some solecism in social life, kept Needham silent on this point. For my part, who have arrived at a time of life when one is no more alarmed at a solecism than at a ghost, few things

are more disagreeable when visiting a strange house than the running the dinner hour too fine. Even if you have not left all your shirt collars at home, there is sure to be something amiss, and the gong sounds while you are still in your shirt sleeves. With a hostess such as Mrs. Blythe, likely to be as particular about a guest's punctuality as about his having polished leather shoes, this catastrophe was especially to be dreaded; yet Needham risked it, rather than confess "I have got the key of my portmanteau in my pocket." Such weakness have even noble minds.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. BLYTHE.

As there is one glory of the sun and another of the moon, so are there different enchantments of sea and river scenery. Needham had seen but little of the natural beauties of his native land. For the district where he had passed his boyhood and his youth had possessed none—it had been a manufacturing town with smoke-dimmed air and cinder roads—and “the level waste, the rounded grey” of Cambridge had been only picturesque by comparison. He had, it is true, beheld the marine loveliness of Bournemouth, but the “river’s wooded reach” he had not seen, and the sight of it, as it presented itself at Stretton, was a revelation to him. It is a good many years since America was discovered, but only a few since Americans discovered our Thames, save where it washes dirty London; now they knew—the best of them—that from Oxford

to Windsor by water is a trip to Paradise, and far better than going to Paris when they die. Of course, it must be in summer, before autumn has laid its "fiery finger" on the leaves, or at least before the "silent highway" loses itself in mist. In June and July that name is a misnomer indeed, though all its sounds are musical, and its movements free from hurry and disquiet.

The easy dip of the oar,
The careless swell of the sail
Coasting along the hollowed shore
Amid the lilies pale;

the splash of the tow-rope, the leap of the fish, and the laughter of girls—these are then its voices. Even the deep-toned cry of "Lock! lock!" gives no more impression of disturbance than that noiseless parting, of the gigantic gates, of which it is the herald. The gaily-painted boats flit by, almost as swift and soundless as the dragon flies; no sound of discontent—unless where "over its own sweet voice the stock dove broods" can be called such—is ever to be heard; the patient angler, his punt moored fast in mid-stream, recks little of his want of success: for, in so fine a scene, fishing, like virtue, has its own

reward. Pygmalion-like the landscape painter here falls in love with his own handiwork, and ceases to dream of rivals, or to dread the hanging committee of the Academy; the river at Stretton seemed the very home of peace and harmony.

"A pretty scene, is it not?" said Blythe, noting his friend's enchanted looks, and lighting his third cigar.

"No," answered the other confidently; "pretty is as misplaced a term for it as to call—well, some daughter of the gods, 'divinely tall and most divinely fair'—pretty; it is beautiful beyond expression. How fine the old church looks through the trees yonder. Is that *your* church?"

"Oh, yes; they are all my churches hereabouts; only, in order to prevent jealousy, I carefully avoid going to any one of them."

"It seems to me that one could live among such sights and sounds as these for ever," murmured Needham, in a tone of admiration—nay, of reverence—that contrasted strangely with the other's frivolous sarcasm.

"No doubt; you remember what I told you of one's first day in the country; that is still more

true of one's first day by the river. By this day week, if you manage to stay as long with us, you will be bored to death with it all; *I* am. Do you know what the river is used for in the neighbourhood in the winter time?"

"Well, I suppose navigation still goes on."

"Not a bit of it. It is used for suicides; not for determined ones, of course; they don't require to be tempted; but by the inhabitants generally. There was a famous one at the lock yonder, though I am bound to say the river was not entirely the cause of it. It was the lock-keeper's daughter."

"How shocking! Did it happen lately?"

"Not exactly lately—about thirty years ago; but the young lady still haunts the spot. Her father she thought cruel, and her lover she thought kind; whereas the exact reverse was the case. It was a case of Miss Bailey in the ballad. One night there was a doleful cry of 'Lock, lock,' and the old man got up and opened the gates, only to see by the moonlight his dead daughter floating down the stream, with her golden hair streaming out behind her. She had come 'home' in that way at last."

"What a sad story!"

"Yes; and the same tale is told of every lock on the river, which bears out my statistics—and now it wants just five-and-twenty minutes to dinner time."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Needham. "It is quite impossible I can be in time."

"Of course it is, if you put on evening clothes; but we won't do it. I am only too glad to be saved the trouble."

"But Mrs. Blythe is so particular, she will be annoyed——"

"With *me*, not with you; I'll make that all right. You forgot the time in your admiration of the scenery—her scenery—and I had not the heart to remind you. That compliment to Stretton will make up for everything. If you think she would like to *see* your evening clothes you can bring them down in your hand."

It was, however, with many misgivings that Needham perforce presented himself at the dinner table in morning costume. The splendour of the feast was itself a reproof to him, not to mention the disapproving glances of his hostess. Though she had observed, like one who repeats by note

at the dictation of another, "I know that it was not your fault that you stayed out so late, Mr. Needham," it was to him that they seemed to impute the cause. "When my son is alone," they seemed to say, "he always dresses for dinner, as every gentleman should do. It is the example of one of the lower orders that has led him astray."

There was no rebuke in the glances she cast at the real offender. "My Walter would look aristocratic in a smock frock," was obviously what she was saying to herself; "but it is not everyone who possesses his natural advantages."

Under other circumstances it would have been pleasant to note the pride she took in him. She was proud of everything that was hers; of her house and servants, of her lace and diamonds; of her position in society, and of her great possessions; but her son was the very apple of her eye. His very faults were dear to her because they were a part of himself. Just as the wife of a man of genius will excuse his shortcomings, so she made allowance for whatever in him was amiss. It was only to be expected that so admirable a character, so intelligent and enchanting, and so well dowered by Fortune in all par-

ticulars, should have his little weaknesses; they were, after all, only the complement of his virtues. Perhaps—who knows?—in the solitude of her own chamber, and at her prayers, Mrs. Blythe was conscious of her own deficiencies; had some obscure conviction that her views of life were slightly artificial, and her sense of duty not of the highest standard. We know ourselves—even the most thoughtless of us—better than the philosopher of old supposed. But, so far as her boy was concerned, maternal love had absolutely blinded her. If compelled to say what she considered was most wanting in him, she would probably have replied, “a sense of his own importance.” He was too careless of his own prospects and position; too apt to be hail fellow well met with inferior persons; too devoid of dignity. That he was popular with everybody was a matter of course; how could it be otherwise with one of his admirable and attractive nature? But it was a pity (though of course there was nothing wrong in it) that he called the gardener “Bob,” and chucked the housemaids under the chin. Moreover it was deplorable that he was averse to society, in which he was so formed to shine. She

could not conceal from herself that even the best selected dinner parties had very little attraction for him; and what was worse the best selected young ladies. That very afternoon Lady Druse had called, with her daughter, and expressed her great regret at not seeing "her charming son." He had not, indeed, fled from their presence knowingly, but if he had known of it, he would probably have fled from it all the more. Yet Edith Druse was a most eligible girl, beautiful, accomplished, would one day have at least five thousand a year, and in the meantime had a fine appreciation of her own position. Mrs. Blythe could not understand what Walter meant by saying that Miss Druse ought to wear a martingale, but it was a curious observation to apply to a dignified and irreproachable young woman.

"You gentlemen were properly punished for running away from my visitors this afternoon," remarked Mrs. Blythe, in a pause of the conversation; "they turned out to be Lady Druse and her daughter."

"That is just like my luck," sighed Walter dejectedly. "I am used to it; but I am very

sorry Needham missed seeing Miss Druse; it would have been a treat indeed to him."

It was possible that Mrs. Blythe mistrusted this eulogy, but she showed no sign of incredulity.

"Yes, they are charming people," she continued, addressing Needham, "and a very old family. You have heard of the Druses?"

Needham was about to express regret at his ignorance, when Walter struck in: "Of course he has heard of them; the Druses of Lebanon."

"That was, perhaps, where they originally resided," observed Mrs. Blythe, "but they came over with the Conqueror."

"What an immense suite he must have had with him," remarked Walter; "there are at least half a dozen families in this immediate neighbourhood who, if we are to believe their own account, belong to it. I wonder that more ancestral use is not made of Hengist and Horsa, a firm quite as respectable—and longer established. I'll ask old Hardacre, the next time he tries to inveigle me into his stable, whether he did not come over with Horsa."

"My dear Walter, how you do run on," ex-

claimed Mrs. Blythe, in a tone at once doubtful and admiring. "I don't think the Hardacres—at all events the Berkshire branch of them—ever claimed to be so old as that. On the other hand I have always been told that the Druses are the very oldest family in these parts."

"Miss Druse herself is not a chicken," observed Walter.

"What nonsense you talk, sir," replied his mother, indignantly. "She is no older than you—to speak of."

"Then we won't speak of it," laughed Walter, good humouredly; "but I will bet—or rather I would if I ever did bet—that she will never see five-and-twenty again."

"She is just three-and-twenty, sir—not a day older, as I happened to learn this very afternoon. Next Friday will be her birthday."

"Very good; we'll send her a birthday present, and whichever of us three is most out as to her age shall buy it. I'll drive Needham over to look at her to-morrow, then we shall all start fair."

Needham protested that nothing would induce him to undertake so delicate an investigation.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Blythe. "Moreover, so far as making the acquaintance of this very charming young lady is concerned, the visit is unnecessary. I did not mean to tell you of the treat that is in store for you just yet, because neither of you deserve it, but Lady Druse has asked us all to a picnic to-morrow. It is quite an informal affair, for which she apologised, but I accepted her invitation for both of you, of course."

"A picnic!" ejaculated Walter, lugubriously; "how I hate a picnic."

"I am sure Mr. Needham likes it," said Mrs. Blythe, turning to her guest with *empressement*. "Do you not, Mr. Needham?"

That gentleman was in the same position as the stranger who was asked whether he liked playing the fiddle, and replied that he didn't know because he had never tried. He had never been to a picnic, and therefore did not know whether he liked it or not; but, perceiving which way the desires of his hostess lay, he hastened to say that he liked picnics very much, and should be greatly disappointed not to go to this one. He was well rewarded for his politeness by one of

Mrs. Blythe's most gracious smiles; he felt that the least he could do was to fall in with the proposition; he had seen enough of her already to recognise the fact that such matters were not "things indifferent" with her, but of importance in her eyes—in fact, the only things that were of importance.

Walter, however, was by no means so gratified by his friend's surrender, the motives of which were perfectly obvious to him.

"I know what will happen," he murmured; "it always does. The salt will be forgotten, and what is food without salt? All the places that are reasonably comfortable—the moss seats and the smooth crannies of the trees—will be monopolised by the ladies; we men will have to sit on snags and stones, if we are allowed to sit at all, instead of having to wait at table where there is no table. If *les domestiques se grisent* as usual"—Blythe spoke in French (or what he believed to be such) out of respect for the feelings of the servants, a characteristic trait in him—"I am not going to wash up and pack things."

"My dear Walter, how *can* you be so foolish? Everything that is done by the Druses is sure to

be well done. The picnic is to be held on Bulrush Island, where, as you know, they have a beautiful summer house. It will be just the same as though they were dining at home."

"Then why on earth can't they dine at home, and without *us*?" pleaded Walter, feebly.

It was clear, therefore, that he, too, had surrendered, though with scant grace.

Later in the evening Mrs. Blythe confided to Needham that the picnic had been arranged for long ago, but that the Druses had felt that there was "no use" in asking Walter; he was so peculiar about entertainments of that kind; but, hearing that he had a friend staying with him, they thought he might be tempted through his guest. "And I am very glad you are here," concluded the old lady, "to set such a good example to Walter."

It was not quite such a gracious speech as she intended it to be; but Needham was well satisfied to have pleased his hostess, though in so doing he had certainly not pleased himself. There was only one thing that promised any gratification to him in the festivity of the morrow—the probability that his friend Grey had been included in the invitation.

CHAPTER IV.

A TÊTE-À-TÊTE.

THERE was a good billiard room at Stretton Park, a luxury wasted on its present guest, who knew nothing of the game, but, since it was large and lofty and the night was warm, Blythe took his friend there after tea instead of to the smoking room, which was of smaller dimensions, and, as he described it, "stuffy."

"You've got us in for a dullish function to-morrow," my dear fellow," observed the host, as they sat on the divan together over their coffee and cigars. "I know, however, that you did it to oblige my mother, and not to please yourself."

"Well, of course, when I saw she wished to go"—

Blythe broke into a little peal of laughter. "You really don't suppose *she* means to go—*my* mother to a picnic!—she would as soon think of

going to a circus. I think I see the poor dear, dressed to the last extremity, and with that air of serene repose which puts the noses of our Lady Clara Vere de Veres quite out of joint, sitting on a log and infested with earwigs. No, no, she knows better than that. In common with many experiences we recommend to our fellow-creatures, which we are much too wise to risk ourselves, she thinks the picnic will do me good, though she herself stops at home. It will be an opportunity for me to see more of these eligible young ladies of the neighbourhood, whom she pictures to herself as always ready to catch the handkerchief I may be graciously pleased to throw them. A picnic, my dear Needham, is a mantrap, set out of doors instead of in, and baited quite as carefully, though with an air of negligence. Some men are more susceptible in the open air, after champagne, than in a ball room. I hope that may not be your case; it certainly is not mine."

"*I am not afraid,*" said Needham, smiling; "the traveller who has neither watch nor purse smiles at the foot-pads; with only a Fellowship to live upon, which is made void by marriage, I am scarcely an eligible *parti*."

"Oh! *that* won't save you, my good fellow. You are not like the bleak which one catches instead of a perch and throws into the river again; there are old girls hereabouts for whom any man is fish that they can hook. By to-morrow night you'll probably be an engaged man, and in the seventh heaven, or, in other words, about to be admitted into a county family. But what shall I have suffered wholly without compensation? A picnic anywhere is bad enough, but a picnic on an island is intolerable."

"What is the peculiar disadvantage of it?"

"Well, you can't get away until the other people go; it is like those churches whose doors are locked and not opened till the whole congregation breaks up. To be sure, I can send up our pair-oar, and then we shall be independent."

"But why not row to the island ourselves?"

"My dear fellow, it's up stream. We can row back again, of course, but surely not both ways?"

"But I thought you told me, when I used to abuse you for your laziness at Cambridge, that in the country you took plenty of exercise."

“So I do, plenty; but I am a moderate man. However, we will put on our flannels and walk over the Downs to Shipley, change our clothes at the inn, and after the picnic change again and row home. That will be very pleasant—not the changing our clothes, which I hate, but the walk over the Downs. They not only command an enchanting view, but are interesting in themselves. They extend—a noble expanse of turf—for thirty miles and more; the old Roman road—the Ridgeway—runs along them. The old Professor has doubtless told you all about that. He talked to me on one occasion for an hour about Cuckhamsley-hill, without my having the least idea that he was referring to my old friend Skutchimer *Nob*, whom I have known from childhood. That is one of the great advantages of being scientific, to have a name for everything by which everyone who knows it best is unable to recognize it. That is why our classical friends, not to be behind-hand, are changing all the names made familiar to us by Lempriere, and call Hercules Heracles, and Cicero Kikero. The learned cannot afford to make things easy for us common people.”

"I don't think that sentiment would have our friends Grey's approbation," observed Needham, smiling.

"Then one must endeavour to get on without it," observed Blythe drily, and with a complete change of his genial manner, as though a sweet champagne had suddenly become *extra sec*. It was difficult under such circumstances to pursue the subject, and yet to utterly ignore it would have been still more embarrassing.

"I suppose Grey will be at this picnic?" remarked Needham, in as indifferent a tone as he could assume.

"I don't know, I am sure," returned the other, yawning. He rose from his chair and began to knock the billiard balls about with aimless vigour, like a man under some mental excitement which he would fain forget in physical action. Nimble as was his tongue, it seemed as though he was unable to start another subject of conversation.

"Perhaps it is as well to tell you," he suddenly exclaimed, speaking very fast, like one who has at last made up his mind to broach a subject that is disagreeable to him, and which he wants to "get over," "that Grey and I have fallen

out. He was utterly mistaken, and quite in the wrong, but you know, or, rather you don't know, what he is capable of in the way of obstinacy; you may show that he is in error a thousand times, and, like a woman, he still persists in his own view. Where he differs from a woman," he added, with a touch of his old humorous manner, "is that he will not acknowledge himself in the wrong, even in the meanwhile."

"But that is not at all my experience of Grey," said Needham gravely. "He is certainly not quick to take offence with anybody; though, of course, he had prejudices. He could never stand Gresham, for example; but then no more could *you*."

"Prejudices, yes, and fads of all kinds; and as for not being quick to take offence, he makes up for that by his violence when he does take it. Touch him in a tender place, and he will cut your throat as soon as look at you."

"My dear Blythe, how *can* you say so? I have never seen Grey in a passion in my life."

"*I* have." There was a silence, broken only by the astonished billiard balls driven about in defiance of rules. The two words came as a

revelation to Needham, on which it was difficult to comment. "Well, it is a matter not worth talking about," continued Blythe, after a long pause; "but I think it only fair to you, in case we should meet the man, to let you know that there is a rift, not to say a rent, in our lute. If I get a nod from him it is as much as I expect."

"But has this unhappy misunderstanding been going on long, Blythe? I gathered from your letter that there was something amiss between you, but nothing like this."

"So far as I am concerned there is no misunderstanding, and never has been. How long the maggot may have been hatching in Grey's brain I am sure I don't know."

"Does—does—Miss Martin know about it?" stammered Needham. A dreadful suspicion had crossed his brain—nay, had stopped there, which compelled him to put the question.

"Certainly not. I do not accuse Grey of being so mad as that; I mean so mad as to have spoken to *her* upon the subject. It would be distasteful to me to speak about it even to you. And, after all, the thing may blow over.

Grey will not be at the picnic to-morrow; for I happen to know he is in London, and will probably remain there till the Martins come home; but, in case of accidents, I thought it well to say what I have said. That was a good cannon, was it not? By the by I have never asked you after Halford. How is that long-headed undergraduate?"

"Rather disconsolate at his tutor's departure. He bid me say that, though you had done him an injury in asking me to visit you, he forgave you."

"I wish I had thought of asking him, too. By Jove, I'll do it at once." Blythe threw down his cue, and, seizing upon some notepaper on a table near him, began to write in his usual impatient way, at the same time continuing his talk with Needham. "He is a most capital fellow. Just the man to appeal to if one was in a hole of any kind; he would not only pull you out, but enjoy it."

"And such a clever fellow," observed Needham, no less pleased to have found a subject of conversation in which there could be neither disagreement nor embarrassment, than at the pro-

spect of having such a fellow guest. "I cannot imagine how it was that he failed at the bar."

"For the same reason that a genius—though Halford is not a genius, nor anything of the kind—fails at school and college; his wits are of the independent kind, and concern themselves only with such matters as interest him. He ought to have been at the Common law bar instead of the Chancery bar, but even so he would not have made much of a case unless it took his fancy."

"That is very much what I find in his reading," assented Needham; "what he likes he acquires rapidly, but only what he likes."

"Then he won't acquire much at Stretton, I reckon," observed Blythe dryly. "However, your being here will be a temptation to him; I am baiting my hook with you. '*Needham is being bored to death here, and entreats you to come to his assistance; he has yawned three times during this present writing.*'"

"I beg your pardon; it is you who have been yawning," remarked Needham.

"Have I? Well, that only makes the affair more pressing. When your host takes to yawn-

ing there is need indeed to call in help. My dear Needham, forgive me, but the fact is I'm dead beat. I have not slept for many nights."

The speaker's manner had suddenly changed to one of piteous despondency. It was his tone more than his words that alarmed Needham, though they were unexpected enough.

"Not slept? Good Heavens! and why not?"

"I don't know why not. Perhaps it was my liver, perhaps it was my conscience, perhaps it was the devil. I sometimes think that I *am* the devil—a metaphysical complication that has only occurred, I hope, to a few people."

In spite of the outrageousness of the notion there was a bitterness in the expression of it that gave it a certain sort of reality.

"These ideas are over my head," said Needham, with a vague sense of discomfort; "you have got beyond me."

"On the downgrade; yes, that is very true. You may not be an angel, but I am its contrary. What rot people talk about our concealing from ourselves our own wickedness; as if we could do it. We may think ourselves deuced lucky if we

contrive to conceal it from other people. Why, if one was to say what one thinks—sometimes—no decent person would ever speak to us again. You are far the most respectable man I know, yet I daresay you have thoughts, occasionally, that you would not like to see written up on that wall yonder. You are blushing; but why should you? of course you have. Why, we have no control over our actions. If I was to do anything very bad to-morrow, and died the next day, the doctor at the post mortem, so the men of science say, could point to the very spot in my brain that disgraced me.”

“I don’t believe one word of it,” said Needham, emphatically. “These are the arguments of vicious men, who would shift their own sins to Nature’s shoulders; they talk the same rubbish about heredity. If such views are really true there is no such thing as vice, or even crime. It is not only unfair that men should be preached at by the parsons, but that they should be ‘run in’ by the police. Why should they be punished for doing things that they can’t help?”

“Why, indeed?” answered Blythe, drily. He had again taken up his cue. “Why should those

balls have made that cannon which I never intended?"

"Because there are certain laws, which you wouldn't comprehend even if I could explain them, that impelled them to do it. It was the compulsory consequence of a voluntary action. You can't commit a sin, and then pretend that the catastrophe that follows it was not your fault, because you did not foresee it."

"My dear Needham, you are getting on the confines of metaphysics. Is it not time to go to bed?"

"It is indeed," admitted the other. "I had forgotten that I had not dined at four o'clock, as at St. Neot's. Good night, old fellow, and pleasant dreams."

"Ah, there's the rub," answered Blythe, gravely, though he shook hands with his usual smile.

Needham was glad to get to his room; not that he was tired, but well pleased to escape from a conversation that was oppressing him. It was a relief to him to think that Halford would probably soon be at Stretton (though more for his sake than his host's) to take the burden

of whatever it was on his more capable shoulders. That there was something wrong with Blythe which he could not fathom he felt sure, but Halford might be able to do it. The latter, as he knew, had not so high an opinion of Blythe as he deserved, though he admitted his talent; he thought him selfish, frivolous, and void of all serious thoughts; he would certainly not think that now. He was a kind-hearted fellow, and, as Blythe himself had said, the very man to help one out of a hole, and Blythe, it seemed to Needham, was in a hole of some sort. What could possibly have prevented him from sleeping "for many nights" but the having something disagreeable, or even dangerous, on his mind? There had been a time when Needham had found sleep far from his eyes. Was it possible, he thought, with a flutter of fear, that the cause might be the same in both cases? There had evidently been a violent quarrel between Grey and Blythe, and it was Grey who was—or thought he was—the aggrieved party. If it was not about Ella Martin what *could* it have been about? What other subject would have put Grey in such a passion that Blythe had described him

“as ready to cut his throat as soon as look at him?” It was true he had said that Ella knew nothing about the matter, whatever it was, but still she might since have heard of it. It was a comfort to feel that, for the present at least, nothing unpleasant could happen, since the Martins were away from home; but the idea of the possibility of such a contingency, however remote, filled Needham with vague fears and a passionate indignation that was even more fatal to slumber. He had never slept so ill in his life as in that palatial chamber and on his bed of down.

CHAPTER V.

AN EARLY RISER.

THOUGH it is far from true that "Joy cometh in the morning," for it is then that the blackness of desolation strikes the widowed heart most keenly, there is a certain cheerfulness in daylight which dispels mere vague apprehension. Things did not look so bad to Needham as they had looked the night before as he rose from his well-nigh sleepless bed to find the sun shining on the smooth lawns and glittering river. The birds were singing in the woods, and a mellowed thunder came through the open window which was new to him, the music of some tumbling weir, at a great distance. It was early, and at Stretton Park they did not keep early hours; not a soul seemed to be stirring save himself, but he got up as usual, and, descending the great oak staircase, let himself noiselessly out at the hall door. As a rule the habit of early rising is in-

convenient to a guest in a country house where fashionable hours are kept. He does not know what to do with himself until breakfast time. His intrusion into any of the "living" rooms is out of the question, for the servants are dusting them; and, in any case, the appearance of a large apartment emptied of its usual tenants is very unattractive. But once out of doors one is as much one's own master as in one's own house.

The beauty of the landscape on all sides enchanted Needham; it was difficult to imagine that on such a scene of peace any trouble could intrude. Even outside no servants were yet abroad. There was no click of that mowing machine which has taken the place of the cool sweep of the scythe; no sound of hoof from the distant stable; only the rooks were active, interchanging their hoarse greetings, and the wood pigeons making their piteous moan. How few of those who are capable of appreciating the spectacle ever see the early morning. Of the sunrise indeed some do occasionally get as it were a back-stair view, as they return from some scene of dissipation where they have remained

all night, but their object is naturally to get to bed as soon as possible. "The mist that puts forth its arm and loiters slowly down," the gradual awakening, first of nature, then of the animal world, and then of man—like a new creation—are rarely beheld by us; even to Needham, who had certainly not been deprived of it by any claim of fashion, the experience was novel. The poet describes one who habitually enjoyed this spectacle as brushing "with hasty steps" the dewy lawn, but the less accustomed beholder is tempted to linger.

Very slowly Needham took the path by which Blythe had led him on the previous evening. On this occasion there was plenty of time to spare, and on every hand there was something of beauty to attract his eyes. The long arcade was cool almost to coldness, yet he found himself stopping at a certain seat, and looking at what he had been told was Ella's favourite view with a new interest. Would she ever look at it again, he wondered, or had her last visit to Stretton Park been paid? Even if the quarrel between his two friends had not been on her account, she could hardly come where Grey abstained from coming.

It was—it could be—nothing to him; it was to the last degree improbable that he should meet her again, and never by his own will; but, however distant she herself must be, all that was connected with her touched him nearly, and would ever touch him. Blythe had said that what girls called “meeting their fate”—by which they meant the man they were to marry—was all gammon and rubbish; there were three Fates in the heathen mythology, and most girls met more than three before they secured Mr. Right; and with girls it might be so. But, for his part, having once met Ella Martin, Needham felt that he could never regard another woman in the same light. If her affections had not been engaged elsewhere, he would have done his best to win her, notwithstanding the inequalities of birth and wealth that barred his way; and, failing to do so, as he doubtless would have failed, he could imagine himself fretting like a child, or raging like a madman, at his ill success; but, as it was, honour and friendship forbade him so to behave; only he could never trust himself to see her. At the same time, every scene of beauty that now presented itself to him had an added attraction for

him in the thought that her eyes had gazed upon it, and admired it. It was a melancholy pleasure, but still a pleasure, like the visiting some spot heretofore unknown to us, but which we know was a favourite haunt of one whom we have lost for ever. She had trodden this path through the wood, and that meadow beside the river.

There was someone treading it now, whose presence was almost as astounding to him as that of Ella herself would have been. With his cap at the back of his head, and his hands deep sunk in his pockets, Walter Blythe was pacing the river bank. With quick noiseless steps that had already smoothed a path on the wet grass, he was walking to and fro, looking neither to the right nor to the left, like an unquiet spirit.

To one acquainted with Blythe's habits it was an amazing sight; he was an habitually late riser, by no means a lover of walking for walking's sake, and ridiculously averse to getting his feet wet. Moreover, what still more excited Needham's surprise, and even alarm, was the expression of his friend's face, which was even more wild and haggard than on the previous night. Every now and then he stopped, and, like an actor reciting

his part, indulged in violent gesticulations. Though already through the little gate that opened from the road into the field, Needham would have withdrawn, unobserved, for he felt like an involuntary eavesdropper, had not Blythe happened to turn in his walk, and catch sight of him. Then came a smothered execration, followed by a forced laugh: "Hullo, old fellow, what, are you up with the lark, too? I hope it is for some better reason than I had."

"Well, the fact is, I didn't sleep very well."

"That was just my case," rejoined Blythe. "I think there must be thunder in the air," and he gazed about him as though he expected to see it; but, as the other easily perceived, to avoid meeting his astonished looks.

"I think there must be thunder," answered Needham, awkwardly enough, for the morning was particularly fresh and free from oppression.

"You remind me of Hamlet's friends in their polite agreement with him about the shape of the clouds," replied the other, with a cynicism that but for his jesting tone would have been contemptuous. "Come, confess you think me mad, as they thought him, and have done with it."

"I must say your conduct strikes me as eccentric."

"Still, a charitable mind would admit that now and then even a lazy man might be enamoured of the beauties of the morning. There was fog enough here to stifle one when I first came down, and, though it's fine overhead now, there are few people, as the American gentleman said, who are going that way, while it's deuced wet underfoot."

This eulogy upon the gifts of Nature was accompanied by the speaker's sunniest smile, and, as he shook hands with his guest, he looked as though he had not a care in the world.

"It will be a fine day, I think, for your picnic," observed Needham, by no means deceived by the other's manner, but eager to escape from the personal topic.

"Yes, I am afraid it will; it is very good of you to call it *my* picnic; but pray don't make me answerable for its arrangements. The happiest thing for a picnic is a pouring wet morning, when it is put off *sine die*, and you have a chance of getting out of it altogether—as we *are* here, and it is still hours to breakfast time, shall we walk up to the lock?"

That walk got afterwards to be remembered. Needham had said to himself a few minutes back, speaking of the virgin freshness of the scene, that it might have been the first morning—the first, that is, over which human eyes had gazed. A time was fated to come when it should seem to be the last morning, though with a very different significance; the last morning as regarded not only the relations between himself and his friends, but as regarded Blythe himself. He was looking at him as he was (or as he thought he was) for the last time, but as often happens when we are saying good-bye for ever, this did not strike him; he had no prescience of the change that was to be. If we ever had, how different would be our conduct in such cases, how careful our behaviour even to the least considered of our fellow-creatures!

To see Blythe with the old lock-keeper was a lesson in social intercourse—a model in natural manners, or in manners so admirably adapted to the occasion that they appeared to be natural. It is probable that he had absolutely nothing in common with him except a breathing apparatus, and certain mechanical appliances; but you would

have thought them perfectly sympathetic, and almost equals and contemporaries. It was plain that "Master Walter" was a great favourite with the old man, as, indeed, he was with all persons of his class. The servants, whether inside or outside the house, adored him. The tenants of the estate acknowledged that though he was no sportsman (a natural defect for which he could be hardly held responsible) he was "of the right sort." Though fastidious to a fault, he had none of that pride of position which offends those who are not our equals. His absolute heedlessness of superiority which they could not but recognize in a hundred ways, made both it and them attractive to them. The humblest of those who conversed with him could discern in him neither condescension nor patronage. Even those lords of the soil who are dearest to their dependents alter their speech to suit them in order to gain the same easy level, but with Blythe this was not necessary. He was always himself (or what they thought was himself) and his "company" could not be bettered. Needham and his friend took their seats upon the bench before the lock-keeper's door, and, having filled his pipe from Blythe's

tobacco pouch, the old fellow became cheerfully garrulous. Lock-keepers are always glad of a chat to make up for their enforced silence in winter time, when their life is almost as lonely as that of a lighthouse-keeper. The silent highway is then dumb, indeed, and traffic, save for a barge or two, at a standstill. Then, no doubt, their environment is dull enough; the dark river runs coldly if it runs at all; the thunder of the river is a voice of doom, "and no birds sing;" they miss the river gossip—which is something peculiar to itself—and become involuntary recluses. On that summer morning, when the river life so far as humanity was concerned, had not yet awakened, the arrival of the two young men was a godsend.

"Well, you *are* early, Master Walter," cried the old fellow, with well pleased astonishment, as he lit his pipe. I never knowed you out like this before."

"I have a friend with me, Joseph, you see, and he gets me into these good habits."

"Aye, aye, a London gentleman no doubt, as wants to have as much of the country as he can while he bides with you; well, that's natural

enough; that's why we old fellows get up so early—rise at the voice of the bird, as the Scripture says—because our time on earth is short.”

“You have a beautiful spot to live in while you *are* here,” observed Needham, “at all events. How lovely the weir looks in the sun yonder, with the church beyond it.”

“Your friend is a h’artist, I suppose,” said the old fellow, with an interrogatory glance at Blythe, and in a tone that did not sound complimentary as regarded artists.

“Well, Joe, not exactly; come defend yourself, Needham.”

This was mischievous of Blythe; he perceived that his friend had mistaken the old fellow’s character (from those references to Ecclesiastes), and proceeding on that false supposition would probably put his foot in it.

“No, I am no artist,” said Needham, “but one cannot but admire the beautiful surroundings of your home. I cannot imagine a more peaceful scene, except, indeed, that which it must present at night.”

The lock-keeper chuckled contemptuously, and looked at Blythe as much as to say “It is

your business, and not mine, to tell this friend of yours what a fool he is."

"You must not imagine, my dear Needham, that pastoral simplicity reigns here even under the chaste beams of Diana. The steam launches come through the lock in the small hours."

"Yes, and I'm obliged to get up and open gates for 'em," said the lock-keeper resentfully. "They are mostly full of drunken men and women, and their language is such that I am thankful as my own girls sleep at the back of the cottage."

This was quite a new view of river life for Needham; nor as the old fellow went on to enlighten him, were these sacrileges upon peace and beauty caused only by the excursions of the Burlington Arcadians, the riparians themselves were little better, and shewed how very little "habitat"—whatever "environment" may effect—has to do with morals. Experience did not supply him with the parallel, or Needham could have likened this old fellow's reminiscences to the scandal of a club smoking-room. It was a strange commentary indeed upon the favourite text of the wholesomeness of out-of-door life,

and the superior morality of athleticism. With mere local gossip the old fellow was as full as his own lock of water, without the same reasonable prospect of becoming empty. He knew of the proposed picnic and who were going to it, and even foreboded a lack of quality in Lady Druse's champagne. "I only judge by the beer," he added modestly, "but the beer at her ladyship's is smallish." To Needham's shocked amazement the old fellow in short poured forth quite a cornucopia of scandal, and it was only when he began to discourse of matters too near home—"Mr. Grey, as you know, is away, sir, and now, as you have doubtless heard, Miss Martin"—but Blythe suddenly pulled out his watch and cut him short with the remark that it was breakfast time.

"That old fellow would go on all day retailing the gossip of the river," he observed, as they walked homeward; "it's a proof of the dullness of our life here, that such stuff should amuse one."

"Still I don't think it's respectful to your friends," put in Needham gently.

"Of course not; what gossip *is*? and yet here

everybody indulges in it. That is our idea of conversation in these parts."

"What was he going to say about the Martins?"

"Some rubbish or another I daresay, but nothing disrespectful you may be sure in their case; Jack knows on which side his bread is buttered, and they buy his fish."

This by no means satisfied Needham, who, in spite of his desire for total separation from them, was curious to know what Blythe had "doubtless heard" about the Martins.

CHAPTER VI.

MAPLETON.

FEW who know the river Thames have any knowledge of the noble downs that fringe for miles, though only at places very closely, its southern bank. Yet they formed once—in Cæsar's time—the only highway. The actual road trodden by his legions, the Ridgeway, runs some miles away, but the Downs themselves—undulating as the other Downs, and sometimes almost as precipitous—are much as they were in the old Roman days. The soil is too poor to repay cultivation, and there are few enclosures. They are chiefly used as a grazing-ground for sheep, and, of late years, as a training-ground for race horses. This latter, of course, is confined to their summits, whose unbroken level extends for thirty miles, dotted by ancient "camps," Danish and Roman, and by sepulchral burrows: the lonely home of British history. But the most

picturesque portion of them are the steep slopes, whose bases broaden to the river. It was along these that Blythe and Needham took their zigzag way towards Mapleton, on the morning of the picnic.

It was a lovely day, and the view magnificent. The contrast of the barren Downs, though themselves by no means wanting in beauty, with the rich land below, through which the river ran like a silver thread, was very striking. At hand there was the sea of turf islanded by clumps of firs, and patches of gorse, with here and there a stunted thorn; in the immediate distance a gay patchwork of vegetation, fed by the fostering stream; and afar the church spires and towers, the cloistered hamlets with the thin blue smoke above them, and the "fields and farms that fade into each other's arms" upon the horizon's edge. Every foot of ground was elastic, the air fresh and invigorating beyond comparison, "better than either that of the mountains or the sea" say the Down folk, who, it must be confessed, however, are little acquainted with either. It was no wonder, whatever private matters they might have to trouble them, that the two young men

felt the influence of such bright surroundings. Blythe had quite recovered his spirits. So far from the prospect of the picnic overshadowing them, he was like a Londoner out on a Bank Holiday. Though his mirth, looked at from a subsequent point of view, appeared feverish and fitful, it did not so strike his companion at the time. Indeed, the objects of interest upon their way were too many to admit of such mental analysis.

"Though we are not upon a mountain," said Needham, as he surveyed the splendid prospect beneath them, "this reminds me of the vision in the Scriptures 'of the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them.'"

"Yes; and it is also equally attractive to his Satanic Majesty. Peaceful as is the scene around us, there was bloodshed here not so many years ago. Out from that belt of woods yonder that fringes the Downs, a band of poachers were driven by keepers to this very spot, and brought to bay. They fought it out as privately as though they had been on Helvellyn. For, though we see so much no one on the earth below can see us, save through a telescope. There were

four men killed in this covert." They were standing on one of those frequent hollows on the Downs exposed only to the heavens, and fit enough for private quarrels. "This cross, the only stone within a mile of us, I suppose, commemorates their fate. The Downs have many such crosses, though few of them speak of murder; they record—though mostly, as in this case, without the names—the fate of travellers who have lost their way in the mists, and been 'smooored' in the blinding snow."

"As the Downs appear to-day it is difficult indeed to associate them with such catastrophes," observed Needham.

"No doubt; one never suspects in summer time what devilish tricks Nature is capable of playing us in the winter; but, indeed, we may say the same of man himself. There is but one step with him from marbles to murder."

"That is our destination, I suppose," observed Needham, who was paying more attention to the landscape beneath them than to his friend's philosophic remarks; "What a pretty village; and what a charming cottage is that on the river bank!"

“That is ‘The Fishery,’ our friends the Martins’; what I call the ‘Martin’s Nest;’ it is the best house in Mapleton, and a deal more comfortable than some larger ones I could mention hereabouts; but it is not a ‘country seat.’ That makes all the difference, you know.”

His cynicism was lost upon Needham, whose attention was fixed upon the residence in question.

“It doesn’t look like an *empty* house,” he remarked, suspiciously.

“I hope it isn’t empty. If it is there has been a first-class burglary.”

“I mean it does not look as if the owners were away. Some of the windows are open.”

“There are probably some caretakers in the place; it is usual to have them when the proprietors are away. There’s Bulrush Island, yonder—the scene of our immolation. It was used, it is said, for a similar purpose—human sacrifice—in the time of the Druids. There’s ‘The Bell,’ the inn by the riverside where the boat is to meet us. We shall be able to steal away when we like without being indebted to anyone. I hate having to wait somebody’s pleasure

for a seat in a boat, and especially if one has to row for other people."

Again Needham was paying no attention; though he kept walking on, it was as one who walks in his sleep; he saw nothing but the cottage which was Ella's home; they had passed it, but he had no need to turn his eyes to see it exactly as it was—a dark brick cottage, with a mellow setting of stone, peeping through the yet still green Virginia creeper, a lawn sloping down to the river, but shut in on both sides by ever-green foliage. It almost seemed a sacrilege thus to pry into its modest reclusion. Here, when she was at home, Ella would doubtless come to cull the willing flowers, or to tend them; here she would sit and read, or think her innocent thoughts by the same stream. A garden of Eden with its Eve, but without its serpent.

Needham felt it somehow as a relief to him that Blythe said nothing of Ella, though afterwards his silence struck him as rather strange; he was generally ready enough to speak of her, and even too freely.

"We turn down here," said Blythe, pointing

to a path so precipitous that rude steps had been cut in it.

"This is positively Alpine, is it not? If we could only get up a few cases of goitre, and get old Rushout to certify to them, Mapleton would be made."

The conclusion of the descent led into the back yard of "The Bell," an excellent specimen of the riverside inn. It was of large size, and before the birth of the iron horse had been a changing house for many coaches; but an air of repose, not to say of decay of custom, now overhung it. Its accommodation for twenty horses had shrunk to a two stall stable; its once plentiful larder now only displayed a couple of fowls and a ham, in which inroads had been already made; inside and out there was that fatal cleanliness about the place to which allusion is made in the Scriptures, "where no oxen are the crib is clean;" but the crib itself, as the bar parlour was called, strove, and not in vain, to keep up its old reputation; it was a picture of snugness and comfort, and if the well-painted barrels with which it was plentifully adorned no longer boasted of their former contents—the fine Old Brandies, Old

Toms, and Dutch Hollands—the lack of them was unnoticed, for there were no customers to ask for them.

If the landlady, the widow Clements, who sat there, was no longer prosperous, she was fat enough, and showed no traces of adversity, while the maid who stood at the counter had all the courage that a barmaid should have, joined with the discretion of a daughter to the house. Blythe was welcomed effusively by both, and was evidently a great favourite with them. Needham admired without grudging the ease of his friend's familiar manner, to which he could himself have no more attained than to the mastery of the Chinese tongue. As flowers are fabled to spring up at the footstep of the goddess, so smiles broke out upon the faces of his fellow-creatures wheresoever Blythe went. As Needham beheld him now, so brimming with homely gaiety, it was difficult to picture him as he had seen him that very morning, smileless and full of he knew not what anxieties and troublous thoughts. Blythe's boat had not yet arrived, so he took his friend over the old inn, into the almost disused apartment, where the passengers by the coach were wont to

eat against time till warned by the guard's horn that they must be up and away; and into the empty "assembly room," with its gallery, where the fiddlers still sat on occasion, though the room was now mainly devoted to magisterial purposes; it was one of those apartments out of the way, and especially out of *our* way, which arouses a passing interest, not only because we have never seen its like before, but (as it seems to us) we shall never see again. It had been the scene of many rustic comedies, junkettings, and flirtations—and also, perhaps, of some rustic tragedies, fathers of families sent to prison for poaching, and so forth—the one as far removed from Needham's life drama as the other. Being told that strolling players and conjurors gave their entertainments in it, it developed at once a personal interest for him because Ella might have been present at one of them. If the two friends could have looked into one another's hearts as they lightly talked of this and that, confusion would indeed have been their portion; but the "windows of the soul" of every one of us are, fortunately, so well curtained by the upholsteress Nature, that privacy is secured.

At the landing stage on the river they could see the invited guests already arriving—some in vehicles, some on foot. Needham recognized Mr. Hardacre in his mail phaeton—a portly gentleman, good-natured enough, but with a slightly pompous air, as befitted a gentleman of such exceptional position. A great many centuries, all full of his ancestors, seemed to be looking down upon him. Dr. Rushout, also, a florid, weather-beaten old fellow, with spectacles, through which his shrewd eyes had beheld many a moving scene, the subjects of interesting reminiscences rather than of regret. Of others Blythe gave him a brief description, not quite so flattering as the “Sketches of Celebrities” in the magazines are apt to be, but not less like. “Mr. Fanshawe, the lawyer—a tall, spare gentleman, the repository of many a family secret, who could tell to a thousand pounds how deeply every estate in the county was “dipped,” yet, like the elephant equally used to picking up pins and drawing field guns, did not disdain to concern himself with a trespass case, and even to take the side of the offender. Mr. Osborne, the parson, of pale, angelic countenance, as one already half-way to heaven, but a taster rather

than a labourer in the vineyard; and Mrs. Osborne, his diligent wife, looking like her own nursery maid, but who did half the work of the parish. The picnic was the one gala day which would suffice her for the summer. All these and many more entered into the pleasure boats prepared for them, and were rowed off for Bulrush Island half a mile away. Then the Druse barouche thundered up with her ladyship all smiles and condescension, and Edith, like a daughter of the gods condescending to be admired of the sons of men, sitting by her side and acknowledging the salutations of the villagers.

“Now these people are all off, and have fired their small talk into one another at short range, it will be safe to join them; our boat is at the river landing,” said Blythe. Then, when they had got down to it, “As you are a stranger to the river you had better take the oars and I the ropes.” He knew the ropes; he was not the man to row when he could steer in any case; but on this occasion he had reason on his side.

Needham had no anticipations of pleasure from the picnic: but, though unused to society, he was not shy; his character was too indepen-

dent for that. If any apprehension of meeting so many strangers troubled him, the beauty of the river, and the fresh air that played upon it, captured his senses and prevented him from dwelling upon it. Their destination was already visible—a large well wooded island, with a summer-house upon it belonging to the Druse family, built in imitation of a Grecian temple. Strains of music came down the wind to them, and, as they drew nearer, of cheerful voices and laughter. A long line of gaily-painted boats moored to the shore showed that other guests had arrived besides those whose embarkation they had witnessed.

“We must first pay our respects to her ladyship,” observed Blythe, a characteristic reflection enough; for, though it was difficult to induce this gentleman to do anything he disliked to do, when once he had made up his mind for the sacrifice, he would go through with it, as if he liked it better than anything else in the world. Ill-tempered fellows, who have intervals of decent behaviour, generally contrive to get certificates of good humour from a few people astonished to find them so affable, and it was therefore not

surprising that Walter Blythe, who was far from ill-tempered, and who so perfectly possessed the art of making himself agreeable, should have had a great reputation. His very disinclination for ordinary society made his pleasantness the more acceptable and like a personal compliment. Moreover, it was not forgotten by the ladies in his neighbourhood, whether on their own account or their daughters', that he was a great *parti*.

"An unexpected pleasure indeed," exclaimed Lady Druse. "Mrs. Blythe gave us but scanty hope of seeing you: she said you disliked picnics."

"On the contrary, I adore them; but I had a guest at home" (here he introduced him) "whose prejudices I was bound to respect."

His humorous tone contradicted his words, and set even Needham at his ease; it was the same—with a difference suitable to every case—with all he met; the impression he left upon them was that his whole attraction to the entertainment had been the hope of finding them there. Nevertheless, Needham noticed that, when not engaged in these social amenities,

his friend's manner was *distrain*; that he wore an air, if not of anxiety, at least of dissatisfaction.

"There are some more boats coming from Mapleton, I see, Blythe; are you expecting any one in particular?"

"Good Heavens! no. Are there not enough dreadful people here already?"

Here he beamed upon Mr. Hardacre, upon whose patronising arm hung poor Mrs. Osborne. "How is the wire fence getting on?"

The Squire dropped the lady at once, as one of the *feræ naturæ* might drop a lamb in prospect of nobler prey, and attached himself to Blythe, leaving the vicar's wife in Needham's hands.

"I think we have some mutual friends in the Martins," she observed. She was not cultured, or she would hardly have said "mutual"; but her voice was sweet and low, and her intention obviously kind.

"Yes, I know them—very well," stammered Needham; "that is, I have not known them long," he added, terrified at his own audacity.

She smiled as though she understood him, which greatly added to his embarrassment.

"I have often heard both Ella and her mother speak of you," she continued; "how unfortunate it must seem to you that they should be away while you are at Stretton."

He murmured something that sounded like an affirmative—some lies are absolutely necessary: he could not tell her that their presence would have been insupportable to him. This good, kind woman (for he felt assured that she was so) was torturing him, and not, as it somehow struck him, unconsciously; she wore a smile that would have been wicked had not her face been that of an angel, the index of a life of gentle deeds. The very fact of her being a friend of Ella's invested her in his eyes with a halo.

"Are you making a long stay at Stretton?"

"I am not sure. It will depend greatly upon the coming of a friend of Blythe's at Cambridge to whom he has telegraphed an invitation."

"That is Mr. Halford, I suppose. You look surprised, but you see I know all about you, thanks to Ella, and, of course, to Mr. Grey; he also is a great friend of mine. It is a double

disappointment that he, too, should be from home."

"Yes, he is in London, I am sorry to say."

"No; in Paris, or else, we may be sure, our trio——But here is somebody you know."

He turned, and there stood Blythe with Ella beside him.

"I told you I had a surprise for you," Blythe was saying; "here is an old friend, Needham."

Ella put out her hand with a pleased smile. "Mamma," she exclaimed, "pray come this way, here is Dr. Johnson."

CHAPTER VII.

INTRODUCTIONS.

It was lucky that Needham had no reputation for a ready tongue, or notice, with such quick observers as were about him, would surely have been taken of his sudden silence, for the sight of Ella had stricken him dumb, being so unlooked for; and since it had come, though unlonged for, so delightful; and yet with the delight, itself astounding, there was a vague sense of amazement and even alarm. How had she come there on Blythe's arm, and Grey away from home and her? It was explicable enough, of course, had he known the key (he said this to himself the while he trembled), but his heart, notwithstanding, sank within him with vague apprehensions. A more open smile than his friend wore, however, was never seen upon the face of a child; just a little triumph in it, such as might arise from the knowledge of the

surprise he had given him—and which Needham felt for certain had been no surprise to *him*—yet not an exulting triumph; not a—the flush of shame burnt in his cheek at the unfinished thought. What right had he to suppose that Blythe sought to supplant their common friend in the affections of the girl he loved? How injurious to credit his wild talk about woman's changeful ways with serious meaning, and still worse with a personal application! It was base to let such notions cross his mind even for a single instant: yet they did cross it, and, as in the case of some noxious insect, left an unpleasant aroma.

“You did not think to see us here, Mr. Needham,” said Ella, with a smile at his evident embarrassment; “we did not expect to be here ourselves until the last three or four days; but the weather at the Lakes became simply unbearable.”

“And where is Grey?” inquired Needham simply.

Blythe burst out laughing, while Ella blushed a little.

“My dear Needham,” he exclaimed, “you are

a born chaperon. I don't see why you should not carry on that profession; your fellowship will be a great advantage in it. 'A gentleman vowed to celibacy undertakes the charge of engaged young persons in the absence of their beloved objects; terms on application to G. N., St. Neot's.'"

"How ridiculous you are," cried Ella reprovingly. "Robert is wandering on the Continent, Mr. Needham, and I fear has not yet received the news of our return."

"There you see, my dear fellow," said Blythe, "Miss Martin has given an explanation of her appearance without her swain, which is reasonably satisfactory. But if you have still doubts, here is her mother."

Mrs. Martin, who was under convoy of Mr. Hardacre, greeted Needham with even more than the gentle kindness he so well remembered, and which had seemed to have a certain pity in it as well as liking for him. There was no reason why, since the young man was a favourite of hers, that she should not show herself pleased to see him, but it struck him that her welcome was especially genial. In his modesty he thought

this might arise from some idea that at this particular juncture he might be useful to her. There seemed indeed no present occasion for any usefulness on his part, no juncture of any kind, but such was the impression her welcoming look produced upon him, and the impression remained. If he could be of any use to her, or hers, he was at her service so long as life was in him; and somehow—and it gave him an exquisite pleasure to think it—she seemed to be aware of that fact.

“You will be surprised not to see Robert here,” were her first words, which, in connection with the previous conversation, seemed curious; “but, unfortunately, our letters have wandered after him; he will not be here, I fear, till to-morrow, or even the next day.”

“Then at all events I shall see him,” said Needham. He had hitherto been anxious not to do so, but now, so much worse—or was it so much better? he could hardly tell—had happened to him; the very thing on account of which he had indirectly felt averse to seeing him, had happened to him so directly, that, whether they met or not seemed of no consequence. He

had shrunk from it because of Grey's engagement to Ella, but here was Ella herself. "At least, I hope so, I think so," he stammered; "that is I am not sure."

"You mean you are a guest and not your own master," she put in quickly; "he will understand that, of course. Indeed, the pleasure of our meeting you yourself to-day is only an accident; we had no intention, Ella and I, of being at the picnic at all. But Lady Druse, having heard of our arrival last night, was so good as to insist on it."

"I see," said Needham, earnestly, because he saw that she wished him to say so; but, as a matter of fact, he did not see. He could not understand why Mrs. Martin should be so solicitous to assure him that their coming was accidental. Why should they not have come?

Mrs. Osborne, perceiving that Mrs. Martin was glad to talk with Needham, or perhaps was more intimate with him than she had imagined, left his side, and with her usual self-sacrifice allowed herself again to drop into the clutches of Mr. Hardacre, and the prison formed by his iron fence. "I am not having it barbed," he

said, "because of its danger to horses," but it *was* barbed, so far as the victims of his conversation were concerned.

"Mrs. Blythe is well, I hope," continued Mrs. Martin, "that is as well" (this with a sly smile) "as she wishes us to believe her to be."

"I think so; yes. She is most kind and hospitable."

"Of that I am sure; it is her nature. And you have I suppose been properly introduced to the 'county'?"

There was no ill-nature in the tone of the speaker, but just a touch of raillery. Her maternal heart had never quite forgiven a certain conversation she had had with Mrs. Blythe when they were first acquainted, wherein that lady had too broadly hinted that her dear Walter's hand was reserved for some high alliance, not knowing that Ella was engaged to her cousin, and under the apprehension that she might "set her cap"—though of course she did not wear one—at the future master of Stretton.

"At present I have been very much slighted in that respect," said Needham, smiling in his turn; "we have been quite alone at the Park,

though Blythe has invited Halford to stay with him."

"I am glad of that for your sake. Robert has often talked to us of Mr. Halford, and he will be a more agreeable addition to you in the way of society than mere strangers, of whom I recollect you were always a little alarmed. You were rather frightened at *us*, you know, at Bournemouth, Mr. Needham, and we were not very formidable people, either."

"You were very kind people," he answered gently, "much kinder than I deserved; and I dare say you thought me awkward, in which you were right enough, and perhaps ungrateful, wherein, believe me, dear Mrs. Martin, you were mistaken. I shall never, never forget——"

"Hush, hush!" What did she fear he was going to say? Was it possible that she guessed the secret which he had scarcely dared to breathe even to himself? This wild apprehension was set at rest by the cheery voice of Dr. Rushout, who had come up with them, and whose approach, in the tumult of his thoughts, he had failed to notice.

"What? Mrs. Martin returned to us already,

and not to consult her devoted medical attendant it is quite clear. Well, I *am* glad."

"It is very unselfish of you to say so, Doctor."

It might have been unselfish, but it was not, perhaps, wholly truthful; for there was a certain wan and anxious expression in Mrs. Martin's face very unusual to it, that did not speak of good health, and which could hardly have escaped so shrewd a professional eye.

"I don't think you know my friend, Mr. Needham?"

"Glad to make your acquaintance, sir," said the fat little doctor, rubbing his enormous nose in a friendly manner, as ladies rub those of their riding horses. It was a sign with him of social satisfaction, though in winter weather it suggested the fear of frost-bite. "Met you the other day, I think, driving from the station with Mr. Blythe. Nice quarters at Stretton Park; I hope you like it?"

For the moment it struck Needham that the remark was ironical; but a look at the speaker's face reassured him. It was beaming with good nature and obviously incapable of satire. The

doctor "got on" with almost everybody, even the most frigid persons; and only ceased to rub his nose when some great specialist from London came down to meet him in consultation.

"And how is Miss Ella? blooming, I trust, as usual? I don't ask where she is, because, with Grey in the neighbourhood——"

"Robert is not in the neighbourhood," put in Mrs. Martin with nervous, and, as it seemed to Needham, apologetic haste; "our letters concerning our earlier return than we anticipated have missed him, and he can hardly be here before to-morrow."

"Well, well, there are plenty of us to help you to take care of her till he comes; we are all her devoted slaves. Here is Mr. Fanshawe; you are a slave, are you not, Mr. Fanshawe?"

The lawyer did not look like a slave, unless, indeed, as his profession suggested, a slave to duty. He held his head exceedingly high—being upwards of six feet in his stockings—and gave himself considerable airs of importance, when he thought it safe to indulge in them. In the company of titled persons and those be-

longing to the landed gentry his tall figure bent considerably, as though a sign of exclamation should become one of interrogation; but, in the present case, with the doctor, and one stranger, and a lady who, though much respected, was of no great social consideration, his manner was somewhat stiff and formal. He thought that some liberty had been taken with him by the doctor's inquiry, till Mrs. Martin expressed to him that its meaning was not only metaphorical but, as regarded her daughter's claim to his allegiance, nonsensical.

"Nay, nay, I cannot admit that," said Mr. Fanshawe, with austere affability; "Miss Ella holds us all in thrall. In most cases—as I am sure in mine—our fealty is paid willingly; but if it were not so, she has a true knight, of great skill and valour, who would compel it. He is doubtless in charge of her, now, to-day."

It was said of Mr. Fanshawe's long-winded speeches by his enemies, that they were only in consonance with his charges for professional advice, and that he kept his hand in (so to speak) by means of them, for the diffuse expressions used in his documents for the conveyance of

land; but they were, to one accustomed to them, slightly embarrassing, since you knew what was coming for a considerable time before it arrived, and yet had to wait for it; a similar unpleasantry to that which arises from seeing a friend on his horse, while yet a great way off, and being unable to communicate with him till he comes up. It was strange, though easily explicable enough, that Mr. Fanshawe, like the others, should take it for granted that Robert Grey was "in charge" of Ella, and again Mrs. Martin had to give her simple explanation of that young gentleman's absence.

Not even yet had she come to the end of these reiterated inquiries, for up came Mr. Osborne, in a soft hat, but without the tassel that, for some mysterious reason, was associated with his clerical garb, and which, in sign that a picnic was not an ecclesiastical function, he had temporarily discarded, and he, too, expressed his astonishment at Grey's absence.

"I saw your daughter afar off, and, I am glad to say, looking as well as ever; but your nephew was not with her; from which I may logically conclude that he has not yet returned to Mapleton?"

Nothing could be kinder than the vicar's tone, or the smile (so forgiving to the human weakness of an engagement) that accompanied it; but Needham could not but observe that the observation was not a welcome one to Mrs. Martin. It was no wonder, however, he reflected, if she had got tired of the subject; for he was ignorant of the excessive prevalence of local topics in social conversation. Except by Mrs. Osborne, he had not been favourably impressed with his new acquaintances, and began to think that there might after all be something in Blythe's condemnation of county talk. As a matter of fact, this feeling was excited, not by its dulness, for indeed it was no duller than much of what he was accustomed to, nor if it had been was he the man to remark it; but he saw that Mrs. Martin, from whatever cause, carried an anxious mind, and that the chatter of these good people troubled her. If any lady had told him that a day was coming, and in the immediate future, when every one of these persons, whom he had seen for the first time, and would probably never see again, would have a personal interest for him of the strongest nature, it would

have seemed incredible. So little do we know of the possibilities of social life, and how intimately the thread of our lives is interwoven with that of our fellow-creatures, and those often the very last with whom we should expect to be mixed up in it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PICNIC.

"ACCIDENTS will happen," said a well-known social philosopher, "in the best regulated families," and even angels will occasionally fall out. The blameless pairs who win the Fitch of Bacon at Dunmow do not, it is probable, end their days without disagreement, but have a bad quarter of an hour now and then. Thus it happened that Mrs. Martin and her daughter had had on a certain occasion "words" together upon the subject of Mr. Walter Blythe. The elder lady, in common with all her own sex and most of his, had a sincere liking for the young man. It was not, perhaps, altogether a voluntary one; he compelled rather than attracted her admiration; he was so agreeable, so intelligent, so distinguished looking, that her woman's heart went out to meet him; but her respect stopped at home. She did not think him ill-principled, but she suspected him

of acting solely upon impulse. His impulses, it is true, everybody said were good, but of that there was no certainty. Once or twice, when they had all been at Bournemouth together, she had thought his manner with Ella too familiar; it was only his way, of course, and she well knew that Ella understood it in that sense, as indeed Grey did also. It was perfectly ridiculous to take Walter Blythe *au sérieux*. One might just as well suppose he believed in the wild opinions it was his humour to express, or to picture him as black as he painted himself.

Mrs. Martin had long taken this general view of his character, and, curiously enough, the first occasion on which it had suffered change was the night on which Needham had dined with them at the hotel. She had, as we knew, recognized the fact of this poor fellow's being smitten by Ella's charms, and as she had watched him in the twilight, watching the two young men and her daughter, had read him as only a woman can read a man's mind in those few pages of it that lie open to her.

What he was saying to himself was, she felt sure, "she is as much out of my reach as the

stars, and, if it were not so, there are already two men in love with her." The glances of envious doubt that he cast from one to the other, convinced her of it.

He had not probably at that time been informed of Ella's engagement, and Mrs. Martin was compelled to acknowledge that, judging from what he saw, the uncertainty was but natural. From that moment arose in her mind the "low beginnings" of apprehension. She did not doubt the genuineness or fidelity of her daughter's affection for Grey, nor impute to Blythe any deliberate intention of seeking to win her for himself, but she feared that he was growing to be too fond of her. Once its seed had thus been dropped in her mind the suspicion grew, and the more the more she watched him. That Ella was ignorant of his entertaining any such feeling she was certain; had it been otherwise, and still more had her daughter given him the least encouragement, she would have spoken to her at once; or if Grey had shown the least suspicion of what was going on, her task would have been easy. But Grey, himself the soul of honour, felt not one spark of jealousy at his friend's familiarity with Ella. The

one from innocence, the other from loyalty, were hurrying on what Mrs. Martin now began to fear would be a catastrophe. For after their return to Mapleton her fears so far as Blythe was concerned had become certainties. She was convinced that he had allowed himself to drift into what had become a passion. Then she had spoken, after long debate with herself, to *him*.

For the moment he seemed stunned and shocked—if it was acting his sorrow was admirably feigned—and then he had exploded with laughter. If it had not been for the distress of mind of which it had been the groundless cause to Mrs. Martin, he protested that her supposition would have seemed to him exquisitely amusing; he had, he confessed, a very great admiration and regard for Ella, but had much too great a respect for the rights of property—especially in a ring fence, though it was but an engagement ring—to think of nourishing any warmer feelings towards her. Mrs. Martin was surely aware that he had been reserved by his mother for some lady of title, at present unknown, and was not in any case at his own disposal. His persiflage was per-

fect, and conveyed in the most natural manner, with due accompaniment of hand and eye. If it had not been a mother who was pleading with him, he would without doubt have succeeded in setting her suspicions at rest; but, as matters stood, he failed. She still mistrusted him.

It was contrary to her wishes that she had accepted an invitation to her daughter and herself from Mrs. Blythe to spend a day at Stretton Park, but Ella had overborne her; indeed, it was difficult for her to frame an excuse in a case where hitherto no excuse had been needed. What would certainly have caused her to decline had she known it at the time, Grey was not included in the invitation. On the occasion in question Blythe took some pains, as he had promised her to do, to mitigate the warmth of his manner to Ella, at least in public, but he compensated himself for that self-denial by carrying her off with him almost the entire afternoon, and leaving the two elder ladies to themselves. There was a certain audacity, and, as it struck Mrs. Martin, even a desperation in such conduct, after what she had said to him, that fairly frightened her. It decided her to overcome the disinclina-

tion she had always felt to speak to Ella on the subject, and when they got home she did so. Thereupon, for the first time in her life, Ella showed a distinctly obstinate and recalcitrant spirit. She was exceedingly indignant, as she asserted, solely upon Blythe's account, though it is reasonable to conclude she felt she herself had not been free from imprudence. But her own complete innocence of any wrong intention corroborated her conviction of the falseness of the charge against *him*. She resented it as a wrong done to one whom she liked extremely, and whom she thought incapable of a baseness; and, what was wholly indefensible, when her mother had besought her at least to alter her manner to him, she declined to do so upon the ground that it would be the acknowledgment of an offence of which both were guiltless. Under these circumstances Mrs. Martin was driven to take the dangerous course of speaking privately and without communication with her daughter, to Grey himself. She well knew the vehemence of passion that lay under the good nature and simplicity of her nephew's character, a fact which few others (including Ella herself) suspected, and accord-

ingly approached the subject with the utmost caution; but, finding him inclined to treat her apprehensions as imaginary, contrived at length to be plain spoken. Even then she failed to arouse in him any sense of danger, but enough of suspicion, as she hoped, to put him on his guard. She did not, with all her knowledge of him, understand that to one of his temperament the slightest doubt on such a matter, even if it had only involved the fidelity of his friend, would be intolerable, and still less that the effect of her communication was to send him at once hot foot to Stretton Park. What happened in that interview between the two young men was never known, though much, had it been so, would have hung upon it; but the consequence was a total severance of their friendship.

It was after that quarrel that Blythe had asked Needham down to Stretton. Mrs. Martin herself did not know the particulars of it, but only that the young men had met; and Ella did not know even that much. It was a mistake to have kept her in ignorance of it, and had serious consequences; for Blythe took it for granted that she did know, and that the friendly manner with

which she received him at the picnic was a sign that she cared nothing for her lover's disapproval, or was prepared to brave it for his sake. It was partly to avoid the possibility of even a chance meeting with Blythe that Mrs. Martin had readily accepted an invitation from some old friends at the Lakes. Soon after the date fixed upon for their return the young people were to be married, and then all this trouble would be ended. What should have put out of the question any notion of inconstancy on Ella's part, had such a thing entered their minds, she had made Grey happy by consenting, with joyful tenderness, to an earlier date for the wedding than had been originally fixed. It was a love match, if ever there was one, and, except that they were first cousins, which some people think undesirable, there were none of those obstacles or objections to it by which love matches are generally surrounded.

Thus matters stood, when, as it happened, the Martins returned to Mapleton a few days before they had intended, but in the full expectation of finding Grey there to meet them. Unfortunately, the news of their return had been

delayed in transit, and he was therefore still away.

On hearing of their arrival, Lady Druse had at once sent them an invitation to her picnic, which, at Ella's instigation, who was fond of all such simple gaieties, Mrs. Martin had accepted. She would certainly not have done so had she thought there would have been the least chance of meeting Blythe (especially in Grey's absence), but that young gentleman was known to dislike all such entertainments, and never honoured them by his presence.

It may be judged, therefore, that Mrs. Martin's vexation and even distress of mind were very great on finding Blythe to be the first to welcome them on Bulrush Island. Needham, on the other hand, she was genuinely pleased to see; not so much because she had a high opinion of him, as because he was a friend of her nephew's, and seemed in some sort as a guardian of his interests. She did not reflect that but for him it was possible that Blythe would not have been there; nor was that in fact the case, for that gentleman had privately received early news of the Martins' return, and would have come at

all events on the chance of Ella's being present. He knew also that Grey would not have arrived; and the looking forward to meeting the girl under such circumstances had kept him of late in a fever of troubled expectation.

If Ella had confessed the truth to herself, she was not pleased, and perhaps even a little frightened, at what had occurred; not that she thought she had the least reason to fear any unwelcome attentions from Blythe, but simply from the view which she knew her mother to entertain of them. At first, therefore, she felt a little embarrassed in his company, but when she found his manner exactly as it used to be, with perhaps rather less than more of warmth in it, she soon allowed herself to yield, as of old, to its fascination. After all she had come to the picnic to enjoy herself; and the more she did so (a reflection which would by no means have given pleasure to her companion had he suspected it) the quicker the time would pass to Robert's coming. It was a pleasure in itself, but only the precursor of a much greater pleasure. Perhaps it would have been more consonant with propriety and the conventionalities of her position

if she had refused to partake of the present joy, but it was in Ella's nature to make the best of things.

Nothing could be more innocent than the festive proceedings. The whole party sat down in the summer house to what was less of a picnic than what newspaper reporters (and no one else) term a collation. The only thing in which it differed from a dinner was that the viands were cold, and nobody listened to the Vicar's grace, which, as he delivered it upstanding in front of a pair of chickens, was supposed by many to express his doubts of how to carve them. Needham and Mrs. Martin sat opposite her daughter and Blythe at the narrow board, and the easy unembarrassed manner in which that gentleman addressed the elder lady quite took her breath away. She almost began to think that her apprehensions must have been, after all, unfounded. Never surely did guilt (if there was guilt) wear a gayer or more genial aspect. It was his humour to picture the island as that of Robinson Crusoe, and to address Needham familiarly as Friday, a circumstance which astonished and even scandalised their neighbours not a little.

“At all events,” said Mr. Fanshawe, with dignity, “our fare is much better than Mr. Crusoe’s.”

“I should rather dwell upon the fact, if you come to comparison, that here we have the advantage of the company of ladies,” returned Blythe reprovingly.

This remark, assisted by the champagne, was received with general favour, rather to the lawyer’s discomfiture. “Well, at all events, we have no savages here,” he answered.

“Oh, haven’t we, by Jingo!” replied Blythe, at which Ella, it is sad to record, was slightly convulsed, though Mr. Fanshawe looked graver than ever.

It was remarked of Walter Blythe’s behaviour that day—when subsequent circumstances had made it noteworthy—that it was singularly illustrative of his character, that his usual tide of high spirits was at the flow, nor had that “agreeable insolence” been wanting, the possession of which had been attributed to him by his enemies, if he had enemies.

CHAPTER IX.

UP STREAM.

WHEN the dinner is over at a picnic it is usual for most of the company—and especially the young people—to wander about the picturesque locality in which it is generally held. But on Bulrush Island this was impossible, because of its scanty limits. There was plenty of room for flirtations, but not for locomotive flirtations. The sitting down ones are perhaps the more pleasant, but not when they are liable to interruption, as happened from the necessity of the case in the present instance. The quiet, full foliaged bays were more adapted for the interchange of soft nothings than “the hawthorn shade,” and invited many a happy pair, but they were subject to intrusion. Determined old bachelors and other mature-minded persons, loafing about with cigars in their mouths, would inadvertently break in upon these delightful scenes,

and either disappear with a velocity which was itself a little awkward, or apologise for their appearance with an "I beg your pardon," or even a floundering "Dear me, I am so sorry," which was still more embarrassing. Blythe was far too wise, and, to do him justice, too careful of the reputation of his precious charge, to place her in any such compromising position. He never, indeed, left her side—which, considering how well he knew her, and how little he was acquainted with his neighbours, was not a matter to be greatly surprised at—but they freely mixed with others, and, though they did not seek the society of her mother, occasionally came in contact with her. It was plain that Mrs. Martin was vexed by their propinquity to one another; but it was difficult for Ella to extricate herself from his company, even had she wished it. "You are my only defence against these dreadful people," he would say pathetically; "do not leave me to their tender mercies," whenever she manifested an inclination to drop him.

It was of these tender mercies—the friendly overtures of Miss Druse and other young ladies, more eligible from some points of view than her-

self—that he somehow gave her to understand that he stood most in fear. She would have gladly claimed the society of Needham, with whom they now and then conversed; but he showed no inclination to join them. It was not only distressingly painful to him to do so on his own account—every tone and look of hers had a sharp pang for him, the *angina pectoris* of hopeless passion—but he was also disinclined to countenance, by it, a companionship he saw was extremely distasteful to Mrs. Martin, and which he had also reasons of his own to disapprove of. Whether Blythe was conscious of this unwillingness is doubtful; under other circumstances it could not have escaped his observant eye, but his mind was now concentrated upon other things; at all events, he was not sorry that his guest and friend avoided them. The weather was delightful, one of those afternoons which redeem the English climate with its summer of “three fine days and a thunderstorm,” by being absolutely unparalleled elsewhere. As the sun declined the river looked unspeakably attractive, and would without doubt have induced many of Lady Druse’s guests to “take to the water,” but for the idea

that to leave the island would be a slight to her hospitality.

Blythe was deterred by no such scruples.

"Don't you think, Miss Ella, that a row on the river would be very pleasant?" and he pointed to his own boat which lay moored beside them.

A reply in the negative was about to rise to her lips; though she was still resolutely of opinion that there could be no possible harm in such an expedition, she shrank from it on her mother's account, who, she was sure, would stigmatize her going alone in a boat with her present companion as "imprudent;" but she was reassured by his adding hastily, "Rushout just told me he would be glad to join us." There could be no reasonable objection to the plan, she thought, if this was the case; and, with no idea of making assurance doubly sure as regarded its propriety, but simply because she thought it would please him, she invited Needham, who stood near, to accompany them. For a moment he hesitated; to be with her under circumstances of such contiguity—perhaps to sit close by her side, or, at all events to gaze into her beautiful face as he

rowed—was an extreme temptation, though the bliss would be alloyed by such a tumult of despairing thoughts. But he resisted it, and, murmuring something about having promised Mrs. Martin to take her to the kettledrum, which was in the act of being prepared, with a real outdoor gipsy fire, he turned away with a sigh. On how little matters hang the threads of destiny! If Needham could have looked into the future, even for a few hours, it would have seemed to him that, rather than have declined that invitation, he would have risked, nay lost, his existence. At the time, so far from thinking himself to blame in the matter, he took credit to himself for his self-denial; but it afterwards became the most regretted action of his life.

“You are very good,” said the doctor, in answer to some observation of Blythe’s which Ella did not catch, and which doubtless formed part of a previous communication, for they had all been conversing together, and with a promptness that could hardly have been expected of his portly form, he stepped into the boat at once, and took his seat and the bow oar.

Under ordinary circumstances Blythe would

certainly have asked him to take both oars, but he was now well content to be stroke himself, which enabled him, with his back to the doctor, to converse with their fair companion face to face. The stroke in a pair-oar has a tolerable exclusive possession of a lady passenger in the stern, while bow is very much out of it indeed. Not that Dr. Rushout wished to be in it; he had his own purposes to serve in his present position, and would have gleefully rubbed his nose to express his satisfaction if the services of both his hands had not been required for the oar; for the stream was powerful, and they were pulling against it, and, leisurely as Blythe went to work, the young man was strong and skilful, and it needed all the doctor's efforts to avoid being pulled round.

"How charming it is to be on the river with you," murmured Blythe, "and to have got away from all those chattering people—almost" (with a backward smile at Bow).

"Since they include my mother, not to mention your own particular friend," said Ella drily, "you must excuse my want of enthusiasm about it." She was somehow not pleased with her

position, into which, as she now felt, she had been somewhat hurried; it did not, after all, look well to thus separate herself from the rest of the picnic party; although, of course, her mother was quite wrong in her suspicions of Blythe, she might still be the better judge in a question of social propriety.

"We are only going a little way," said Blythe, apologetically, and as if in reply to her thoughts, which, perhaps, he had interpreted; "just as far as the Backwater, where the Doctor has to kill somebody slowly—I mean, to make a professional visit."

"Why the Backwater is three miles away," remonstrated Ella, in something like alarm.

"We shall do it under the hour, shall we not, Doctor," said Blythe, confidently.

"We ought to," gasped the Doctor, thinking of what was due to his unaccustomed exertions, rather than of the question of time and space. "I am much indebted to you for this lift, I'm sure, but——"

"It seems rather a dead lift, eh?" interrupted Blythe, laughing. "The fact is, Miss Ella, poor Rushout was due at the Backwater at five o'clock,

and had not a boat of his own to get ashore in, so I offered to take him there by water. I knew that an act of humanity always has your approbation.

It was evident that this one had not, though she did not say so. It was too late to go back now, since the doctor had this appointment to keep, but she had an unpleasant impression of having been tricked into the expedition. The doctor would doubtless cut his visit as short as possible, and they would come down with the stream in half the time that they were now taking, so that no great harm would be done, but she resented the deception—for in no less a light did it present itself—that Blythe had practised upon her, and kept a significant silence, which he on his part did not dare to break. If he had any design in his present plan, and she almost began to think he had, he had certainly not succeeded in ingratiating himself with her to start with.

“We are going very slowly,” she observed presently, in a tone of marked annoyance.

This was rather hard upon her galley slaves who were labouring with great diligence; but the

fact was the stream was strong, and with all the will in the world the doctor did little more than pull his own weight.

"Give *me* your oar, Rushout," exclaimed Blythe, a request to which the other acceded with great promptitude, and, impelled by Blythe alone, the boat made far better progress.

Under other circumstances Ella would have been touched by this act of self-sacrifice, so foreign, she well knew, to his indolent nature; but the time was slipping by, and, a circumstance she had hitherto forgotten, a lock had to be passed through before they reached their destination; she felt too annoyed for pity, and far less for gratitude.

"If you wish it," said Blythe gently, "in answer to the look of annoyance with which she regarded this formidable obstacle, "I am sure Rushout will get out on this side of the lock, and finish the rest of his journey on foot."

"Certainly, certainly," said the Doctor; "and much obliged to you, I am sure, for bringing me so far."

Blythe rowed to land at once, and the other

scrambled out with some loss of dignity, for the bank was rotten, and gave way beneath him.

Blythe enjoyed the spectacle, but Ella declined to be amused.

"I don't see how Dr. Rushout's getting out is to help us home, since we have to wait for him."

"Oh, but we have not," said Blythe; "he always intended to borrow Wilson's (his patient's) gig, and go back by road. So we can start for home at once."

Then Ella perceived that it was fated (and had doubtless been arranged for) that she was to be in Blythe's company alone on the return voyage.

CHAPTER X.

A PROPOSAL.

"THE stream is with us, and now we have got rid of our ballast we shall soon be back at the island," said Blythe conciliatingly, for Ella's brow was dark with disapproval.

"We ought never to have left it," she answered; "nor should I have done so had I understood your object."

"And do you understand it?" he inquired, leaning on his oars and regarding her with his most winning smile; "if I thought *that*, it would be an unspeakable comfort to me, and save us breath that might be put to far pleasanter use than, I fear, we must find for it."

"I don't know what you mean," she replied quickly; "but I do know that you are wasting time—and *my* time—and that we have been much too long away from our friends already." She spoke in a voice designedly peevish and

fretful, to conceal what had become grave apprehensions; but that did not deceive him; he felt that, however unwelcome to her might be the words he had to say, she was already half prepared for them; notwithstanding her haste to be off, he dipped neither oar into the water, but let the skiff float down stream, as before.

“Is it so very irksome to you, Ella, to find yourself for a few minutes alone with me? and has it never happened before?”

The first question was well chosen enough and in spite of her annoyance aroused a certain tender pity, but the second was by no means so fortunate. It not only seemed to suggest (and, indeed, was meant to do so) that she had given him encouragement to place her in her present position, but reminded her once more of those warning words of her mother, to which she had turned so deaf an ear.

“It has happened, it seems,” she answered sharply, “once too often, if it has emboldened you to deceive me by false pretences. To play me such a trick as you have done to-day is not, in my opinion, justified by any conduct of mine

towards you, and if you have so translated it you have made a great mistake." The girl was irritated, but exaggerated her annoyance to conceal her fear; she was, though in a different signification from the usual one, "more frightened than hurt."

"I will not use the hackneyed proverb with respect to love and war, Ella," he answered, gently, "but when opportunities do not occur we must make them for ourselves. I could see no other chance than that I have taken to have a few words with you quite alone. It is evident to me that your society has of late been withdrawn from me—I venture to think by no wish of your own—and necessity has driven me to the little device which you have just denounced so unsparingly. I am sorry it has angered you, but it does not seem to me such a very deadly crime."

His tone was low and soft; his air not penitent, but full of gentleness and humility; but she had never feared him in his wildest hour as she did now in his *rôle* of suppliant.

"I am not angry," she answered hastily, "though I confess I was annoyed; and I will for-

give you freely if you will only hasten home. Can you not see that this delay distresses me?"

"Oh, yes, I can see that," he answered sorrowfully, but still leaning on his oars; "and what I am about to say will, I fear, distress you, though Heaven knows I would spare you if I could. A man is so different from a woman where his feelings are concerned, and so much more selfish and reckless even at his best. When he is thinking of himself only, or of her he loves, she is thinking of others; of the effects her conduct will have upon her people; of the pain she will give; of the trouble she will make. That will be your case, I know, Ella. Yet, after all, it is only you and I who are really concerned in the matter."

"What matter?" she asked, with an air of indifference that ill-assorted with her flushed cheeks and trembling frame.

"Oh, Ella, dear, *you know, you know,*" he answered reproachfully. "I have put it off till very late; I have tried to put it off altogether for your sake; but we are but human, and I, alas! am very *very* human. It will cost you something,

it is true, it costs *me* something—for is it nothing to be called false friend and traitor, and to know one has deserved it—but it will be better in the end, dear, for both of us, better to speak now than to speak later and too late; best of all you may say to die dumb; but I cannot do that, the truth must out: I love you, Ella, and you know it; I love you, I *love* you.” He dropped the oars, and clasped his hands together—not passionately, but pleadingly, as a child that prays at his mother’s knee.

These two were in such a position that not a feature, not a movement, not a whisper of either of them could escape the other; if a hearing was all that he had wished to gain he had indeed secured it.

“This is cowardly, this is cruel!” she murmured faintly.

“I am glad you think so,” was his unexpected reply, “since you may judge what must be the force and strength of the love that can make me so to *you*. It is not a pretty thing to do, I know, to have brought you here on a pretext, to keep you here against your will, to make you sit there face to face with me to listen

to an embarrassing topic, but this is my last chance, Ella, and I had no choice." That mention of "an embarrassing topic" on an occasion so supreme, would have been strange enough in any other man's mouth, but in Blythe's it seemed not unnatural. Discomfort, whether mental or bodily, was what he abhorred, and placed in the same category with catastrophes and cataclysms. His manner throughout, however, though studiously gentle and tender, was full of earnestness and feeling.

"Ella, darling, I have always *loved* you." She would have risen to her feet in her indignation, but the slender skiff with rockings and smackings resented the action, and compelled her to reseat herself. "Yes, from the moment I ever saw you, though even then you were half promised to another."

"Half promised?" she exclaimed, snatching this floating fact out of the stream of protestation, "I was engaged to Robert months before I had ever met you. We had known one another from childhood."

"Just so," he put in hastily; "it was a child's love and not a woman's. You had scarcely

seen another man than your cousin. You were content with his simple ways—I am not saying a word against him, for I well know that he is a better man than myself—his honest talk, his conventional mode of looking at things; you had not seen anyone of your own kind, or that suited you more completely. I am neither such a knave, nor such a fool, as to underrate my rival; he is an excellent good fellow, only a little jealous; but with me—until this occasion, which has been forced upon me—have you not always been more at your ease than with him? Does not your thought leap out to wed with mine? Are not our souls swayed by the same sympathies as this skiff answers to the rudder and the oar? It is not only that you have moods that he does not reflect, but you possess depths of feeling that he can never plumb. If I thought you would be happy with him, even though *I* knew *I* could not be happy without *you*, I would never have spoken. But in a little while you would weary of him. You are not born for a humdrum existence. Do not suppose that I deem myself a more worthy fellow than Robert Grey; I say again that he is the better man; but not the man

to suit you better. Whereas nature has made you and me, in those respects at least which make up social happiness, in the same mould. It sounds conceited in me to say so, but I am not speaking of virtue and goodness, in which you as far surpass me as in your grace and beauty, and, as an old friend of ours expresses it, 'I can't go farther than *that*.' "

It was amazing how his tone kept its even tenour, despite the discouragement in her face, which had grown quite set and hard; more amazing still how his eyes gleamed with their old fun as he quoted the lock-keeper's favourite phrase. Blythe was not one of those who "joked with difficulty;" he would have been humorous on the scaffold.

"You must not suppose that I am speaking on impulse, though the sight of you, and the touch of you, though it is but the hem of your gown, and the being alone with you in this beautiful scene, which seems but made for us, might almost excuse me if I were. I have thought of this hour—I mean the possibility of it—more or less ever since I have known you; but of late weeks I have thought of nothing else.

‘How shall I tell her,’ I have said to myself, ‘how dearly I love her; how with my body I worship her; how with my soul I adore her? How shall I best point out to her how easy in our case Fortune has made the road to happiness?’ There will be trouble, of course; that is unavoidable. What is it you say, darling?”

The girl strove to speak, but, overcome by the tumult of her feelings, shocked to the very core of her being, her tongue refused its office; she pointed, however, with passionate pleading to the oars. He took them up with an obedient smile and began to row.

“You wish to be taken back at once; you dare not trust yourself to answer me just now. I have taken you too much by surprise?”

She shook her head with vehemence, but he took no notice of that; it was evident that he was in no mood to take “No” for an answer. Even if his passion was not at once reciprocated, as his confident and sanguine nature had perhaps ventured to hope, he may have thought that a consideration of other matters—of which he could not hurriedly remind her—the fortune and posi-

tion he was enabled to offer her as his wife, might work in his favour, if left to herself—his rival not being upon the spot to advocate his own cause—he flattered himself that his interests, or what he thought to be such, would not suffer.

They were now within sight of the island, and if he had not said all he had meant to say to her, he had certainly said enough as respected his object. She could be in no doubt as to the feelings with which he regarded her, or to the course which he proposed she should follow. She was to throw over his friend, and take him for her husband in his place.

There came a time when, looking back upon this extraordinary proposal, Ella was inclined to think Blythe out of his mind—there were reasons for her thinking so, and good, or at all events convenient, reasons—but at the present moment no such notion entered her head. She thought him sane enough, but very wicked. And yet—and this it was that made the position so intolerable—she could not acquit herself of blame in the matter. Though nothing could justify his conduct, what had occurred could not have happened had she not given him encouragement.

Had her mother never charged her with it, she might have ignored or even denied the fact; but as matters stood, she was compelled to acknowledge that she had been, at least, imprudent. This was wormwood to her, and had she been in the slightest degree inclined to listen to Blythe's mad and desperate proposal, would have closed her ears to it. Now she had come within measurable distance of her friends, she was no longer afraid of him, and could have found her tongue, had she chosen to do, but anger and the sense of humiliation kept her dumb.

This was fortunate, for, though looking on that troubled face of hers, Blythe could hardly take her silence for consent, he drew from it at least no unfavourable augury.

"I do not now press for a reply, dear Ella, to what I have said to you. Nay," for she was about to give him one, "I will not listen to it; it would not be fair either to you or to me. Tomorrow I will come over to Mapleton, and learn my fate from your own lips."

In silence, and with a hand that trembled less with mental agitation than with a feverish desire to be freed from his company, she pointed

to the island. That part of it which was nearest to them, had no landing-place and was covered with trees and brushwood which for the present hid the boat and its occupants from observation. He obeyed her gesture instantly, and pulled for the little wood. As they drew nearer, she perceived a figure standing on the shore, and obviously awaiting them. For the moment the blood left her cheeks; a sudden suspicion that it might be Robert Grey filled her mind with sickening apprehension; in vain she reflected that she had nothing to reproach herself with; she felt that Robert, nevertheless, would have just cause for indignation. Any quarrel between the two men would be not only shocking in itself, but must needs, with all her world almost within sight, have the most calamitous consequence. It was therefore with great relief, as they drew nearer, that she recognized in this individual George Needham. He was standing on the very verge of the river, with a handkerchief in his hand, either to signal them to approach, or to point out the spot, where a landing could be most easily effected.

“Mr. Needham is awaiting us,” she observed

to Blythe, who, of course, had his back to the island; "I will get out here."

He understood at once that she did not wish him to land with her, and nodded assent with a pleasant smile. As she well understood, this meant that he had nothing more to say, and, until his promised interview on the morrow, was quite content to wait for his answer. He drew the boat carefully to the bank, and offered his hand to help her to get out; but Needham's hand was already outstretched for the same purpose, and she took it without even a glance at her late companion. Blythe said nothing, but bit his lip. Needham whispered something to Ella that he could not catch, and then, to his surprise, took her place in the boat.

"I think we two had better go home," he said, in quiet tones; "the party will soon be breaking up."

"Very good, by all means; it will save all the bother of wishing them good-bye."

As a matter of fact it was the very thing that Blythe would have wished to happen; every moment passed in Ella's society would, just at present, have been embarrassing, while that of

the picnic party would have been intolerable. Still, as Needham knew nothing of what had occurred, it must have been for some reason of his own that he had proposed this sudden departure. For a few minutes neither spoke, but when the boat—giving it a wide berth—had passed the island, with its groups of pleasure takers, who, by the way, showed no signs of leaving, Blythe observed gently:

“Why, my dear fellow, you seem to have very soon tired of the picnic. I hope nothing disagreeable has happened?”

“Well, I don’t know whether you will think it disagreeable or not,” was the grave rejoinder, “but Grey has come back.”

CHAPTER XI.

A NEEDED ALLY.

BLYTHE was still pulling, not that his indolence was laid aside, but because he did not know that his hands held the oars; he rowed mechanically, just as Needham steered; the minds of both men were preoccupied. Only when Needham said "Grey has come back," Blythe ceased awhile from his light labour, and let the stream do his work for him, while he glanced up eagerly in the other's face.

"You have seen him, of course, then; did he say anything about"—he hesitated—"about me and Ella? He did, I see. Well, just tell me all."

"It is not a pleasant task you set me. Moreover, it will do more harm than good. He spoke in anger and on the spur of the moment. By this time he regrets, no doubt, the vehemence of his expressions; and yet I think there was some excuse for them."

“And so do I,” was the unexpected rejoinder. “You will not make *me* angry by repeating what he said. If I had been in his place, expecting to meet my *fiancée*, and finding she was in the same boat with another man—though the matter were ever so accidental—I should have said, ‘D—n the fellow.’”

“Well, it *was* accidental, of course, and, nevertheless, that is exactly what he did say.”

“Very natural. You see I was quite prepared for a little irritation. Hard words break no bones.”

“But unfortunately there was an audience, which may cause scandal. It happened in this way. I was standing with some people at the boat landing; Jephson, Mr. Hardacre’s nephew, among others—a silly young fellow, I should think!”

“A born idiot,” interposed the other. “Well?”

“When suddenly, to my amazement, I saw Grey coming in from Mapleton, in a waterman’s wherry. He looked grave and worried as he stepped ashore, and I felt at once that there was something the matter; but the others crowded round him with effusive welcome, and for the

moment he failed to recognize me. Then pushing them aside he seized my hand and exclaimed hurriedly, 'Where is Ella?'"

"'Don't be jealous, my dear Grey,' said Jephson, laughing, 'but Miss Ella has gone out with another young man, name of Blythe, in a pleasure boat.'

"Then Grey exclaimed, 'D—n the fellow,' so angrily that nobody laughed, as they had evidently been prepared to do. I was perfectly amazed that he should take the thing so seriously, and especially before other people; but he seemed beside himself with irritation. It *was* annoying, however, as you yourself allow, when, having travelled night and day, on receipt of Ella's letter, and found her gone to a picnic, that he was thus deprived of seeing her even then—by an accident, it's true, but which may have looked to him like design. Then I hastened to say, what as you know was the fact, 'Dr. Rushout has gone with them, for I saw them all start together;' but he seemed to pay no attention to me. Then what was very unfortunate, though natural enough, Mrs. Martin, when we met her, shewed some distress of mind at what had happened, instead of

making light of it. It was doubtless difficult to sympathize with him, and at the same time to find excuses for you. It was not her daughter who was to blame, you know."

"Certainly not," said Blythe gravely. "Well?"

"I did what I could, of course, to smooth matters, but to little purpose, and, fearing there might be some unpleasant scene on your return at the boat-landing, I went to the head of the island to signal you to come ashore there. You may imagine how I congratulated myself on the precaution when I saw you and Ella in the boat without the doctor. It would have been shocking if any public quarrel had taken place, and upon her account, between Grey and you."

"There will be no quarrel between us, my good fellow, public or otherwise," said Blythe gravely; "but I am, nevertheless, infinitely obliged to you for your good offices. You are a true friend to both of us." Then added carelessly, "You gave Ella a hint, I suppose, not to say that we came back alone?"

"Indeed I did nothing of the kind," replied Needham, indignantly. "That would have been to presuppose that she was doing wrong, and had

something to conceal. I merely told her that Grey was come back, and on the island."

"And angry? Come, I am sure you added that."

"Well, I did say he was annoyed."

"Just so; you let her see how the land lay. She well knows how to humour the madman, we may be sure."

"I cannot call him that, Blythe, though he shewed an annoyance beyond what the occasion demanded. It was not, of course, that he had any real cause to be jealous."

"Well, of course not," put in the other carelessly; "he will be sorry enough to-morrow that he made such a fool of himself. But I will keep out of his way for the present, lest the temptation to murder me should be too overpowering. My appearance of late has always had the same effect on him as a red rag on a bull."

"Why?" enquired Needham, with sudden earnestness.

Blythe had spoken as he had done to conceal from his companion his intention of going to Mapleton on the morrow, but he had said more than he intended.

"Well, I suppose some foolish feeling of jealousy was at the bottom of it, which culminated in the scene of to-day."

"Then my suspicions," sighed Needham to himself, "were well founded. The cause of quarrel between these men *was* Ella."

Nothing more was said between the two young men upon the subject, though it did not cease to occupy their thoughts. The position of Needham, as Blythe's guest as well as friend, would have made the topic embarrassing to him in any case, even had his feeling with regard to Ella been one of indifference; but, being what it was, he shrank from speaking more of her affairs than was absolutely necessary. Without accusing the other of positive deception, he was well persuaded that more had happened that day than he had confessed to. In his own narrative of events he had very much softened down Grey's manner and behaviour; they had convinced him that if there was no real cause for suspicion of Blythe, Grey believed that there was. The whole state of affairs seemed to him most deplorable, and, though it was a relief to him in one way, that Blythe soon became himself again, and talked and

jested as though nothing serious had taken place, it distressed him in another, since it compelled him to take a severer view of his character than he had hitherto done. He would have given a good deal to have been in his own quiet rooms at St. Neot's, afar from all these misunderstandings and jealousies, which, as regarded Ella, seemed little short of sacrilege. How differently had that meeting with her turned out, about which he had been so apprehensive for his own sake; it had personally affected him less than he had expected, but had on her account distressed him in a manner utterly unexpected. And indeed, though he strove to take an objective view of the matter, he was secretly conscious of a pulling at his heartstrings which had nothing to do with the quarrel between his friends, but only with the innocent cause of it. He did not doubt that she loved Robert Grey with all her pure and honest heart, nor that her affection for him was worthily reciprocated; he began to think it possible that Blythe had allowed himself to be carried away by a mad passion for her as hopeless as in his own case; but, though in all purity and disinterestedness, he felt that he too loved

her as dearly as man could love, and, so far as devotion went, would yield not an inch to either of them. It was curious, with his well defined ideas of right and wrong, that if Blythe's conduct was what he suspected it to be, he should have had any patience with him, but the very strength of his own feelings with respect to Ella caused him to make allowance for one exposed to the like temptation. Still he felt his relations with him were getting strained, and looked forward to the remainder of his visit to Stretton Park with extreme disfavour. He had not the quickness and resource that would have enabled a man of the world to frame some excuse for departure that might have served without giving offence, but was obliged to content himself with the resolve of taking the first opportunity to escape.

The prospect of a *tête-à-tête* for days to come with his present host was well nigh intolerable. How he envied the philosophy or lightness of heart of his companion, from whom the unpleasant impression of recent events seemed already to have passed away. He talked to the old lock keeper, as he opened the gates for them, with the same naturalness and geniality that he had used

the day before, and as though no interest deeper than river gossip was occupying his mind. A scrap of their conversation attracted the attention of Needham.

"You found them as I told you of had come back, Master Walter?"

"Oh, yes, your information is always correct; you ought to have a post in the secret intelligence department."

"I shall never see no post save this here gate-post," was the old fellow's grumbling reply.

Needham could not doubt, in connection with the old man's words upon the previous occasion, that his talk referred to the Martins, in which case Blythe must have been aware of their return, before he had started for Mapleton. This deepened the gloom of his thoughts, already so shadowed by suspicion, and stilled his tongue.

When, after landing, they came within sight of the house, they beheld, to their surprise, Mrs. Blythe walking in the garden with a strange gentleman. Though she moved in her usual stately manner, it was evident by his close companionship, that his society was not disagreeable to her.

"Why, this is a flirtation," observed Blythe, in his drollest tone; "the secret's out why the mater was so anxious we should be off to that picnic."

"Why, it's Halford," exclaimed Needham, with a cry almost of joy, not so much at the sight of his friend as of his arrival at so opportune a moment.

"Well, why shouldn't it be?" returned the other, a little piqued, perhaps, at so extreme an expression of satisfaction. "I telegraphed to him to come as soon as he could, and, it appears, he has come at once. One always mistrusts a lawyer, even a young one, and it seems to me he is scheming to become my stepfather."

The idea was ludicrous enough, but when they met it was obvious by her tone that at all events the new comer had made some way in the old lady's favour.

"It is well you have come back so soon, Walter, for here, you see, is Mr. Halford: why did you not tell me that he was related to my old friends, the Halfords of Shropshire?"

CHAPTER XII.

DREAMFUL EASE.

MANY a man in Needham's place would have resented the ease and speed with which Halford cut him out as first favourite with their hostess. No one, of course, at Stretton Park, while its young master was there, could hope to be anything beyond second fiddle in Mrs. Blythe's eyes, but the new comer was elevated to that position with such indecent haste, *vice* Needham deposed, that one would have thought his predecessor had forfeited it by some disgraceful act. That connection with "the Halfords of Shropshire" had given him the post at once, just as though it had been a Government one, though it cannot be said that he possessed no qualifications for it. He had met ladies of her class and views before, and thoroughly understood how to treat her, whereas to Needham, with every wish in the world to be friends with her, she was a woman

per se, altogether out of the range of his experience. It was as amazing to him that anyone could have lived so long in the world, and yet restrict her thoughts to such trivial matters, as to have seen a man of fifty on a rocking horse. He was touched by her devotion to her son, and not the less grateful to her for her hospitality to himself because it was not quite spontaneous, but he did not feel at ease with her, and was sincerely pleased that her stately attentions had become diverted to another object. It was without a trace of jealousy that he acknowledged to himself that life at Stretton was at once made much more cheerful by the new arrival. He had brought news with him from Cambridge that the marriage day of Dr. Martell and the fair Penelope was fixed, and they drank to the health of the happy pair at dinner. Of course Mrs. Blythe was full of curiosity about the picnic, but chiefly confined her inquiries to "how they—meaning Walter—had got on with the Druses," which that young gentleman answered to her complete satisfaction and Needham's secret amazement, down to a description of Edith's attire. Not a word was said of the Martins having been present on the occa-

sion, of which of course Mrs. Blythe was ignorant, but of the other guests (with the proper exceptions) she expressed her apprehension that dear Lady Druse's invitations seemed to have been rather indiscriminate, an opinion with which Halford (from Shropshire) with the gravest face expressed his agreement.

In the smoking-room they were very merry, with stories of St. Boniface and St. Neot's, and all the topics which young fellows from the University (when they get away from it) are so prone to talk about; to Needham it seemed surprising, that, after such a quarrel with his absent friend and with the complications that might arise from it, Blythe could be in such good spirits, but to hear him laugh one would have supposed that he had not a care in the world. It was not till the next morning that Needham had an opportunity of speaking with Halford alone. He had no intention of confiding to him the occurrences of the previous day, which he felt would be a breach of confidence as regarded their host, but it cannot be said he had no temptation to do so; a presentiment of coming trouble in connection with them oppressed him, and, as Blythe himself had

said, Halford was the very man to consult in an emergency. They met in the breakfast-room; but, finding it as yet untenanted, walked through the open window on to the lawn.

"What a lovely view!" exclaimed the new comer, admiringly. "Folks talk of the 'evening calm;' but there is nothing like the freshness of morning for the proper appreciation of the beauties of the country. Yet in nine cases out of ten it is the guise under which their proprietor himself never beholds them."

"You do our host at all events an injustice," observed Needham, "for if I am not mistaken that is Blythe himself yonder."

At a great distance, perhaps half a mile away, a figure could be seen, through a vista cut in the trees, walking to and fro on the river bank—not on the spot where Needham had found Blythe on the previous morning, but on one still more remote.

"I am sorry it is so," said Halford, quietly. "A man like Blythe does not get up early if he can sleep, nor walk like that for health's sake."

Needham was silent for a moment; they stood watching the distant figure, as with bowed head

and hasty steps, it retraced its aimless path; then, "Did you think Blythe was looking ill?" he enquired gravely.

"Yes, I did; he strikes me as an altered man."

"Yet last night," argued the other, "he seemed in high spirits."

"To my thinking they were a trifle too high, even for him. He has something on his mind I fear. By the bye," he added suddenly, "what has he quarrelled with Grey about?"

"With Grey?" stammered Needham. "What put that into your head?"

"Both of you. We were all talking of our Cambridge friends, yet not a word was said by either of you concerning Grey. You must think very little of my intelligence if you suppose that I did not understand the subject was tabooed."

"It is tabooed still, so far as I am concerned," said Needham gravely. "There is no one in the world, my dear Halford, in whom I would confide——"

"I am sure of that," interposed the other, laying his hand for one instant upon his friend's shoulder, "but not another word, if you please. I

thought it might be some boyish breach which an older hand might mend; but I see it is a more serious matter. Let us go indoors before he sees us."

As they did so the breakfast gong sounded, and they found their hostess already seated at the table.

"If my dear boy has a fault—which of course he has," she interpolated naively, "like other people—it is that he is a little late in the morning. I congratulate both you gentlemen upon your better behaviour."

When Blythe did make his appearance his mother mingled her caresses with reproaches, but not a word did he say of their being undeserved; it was clear that he wished it to be supposed that he had overslept himself.

"And what are your plans for the amusement of your guests for the day, Walter?" inquired his mother.

He looked grave and even vexed for an instant, as though she had expressed an unwarrantable curiosity, but answered with a smile, "Well, they are very young, especially Halford, but still almost able to amuse themselves. How-

ever, we can visit the County Lunatic Asylum, which, I am told by those who have been there, is delightful, or go over old Briggs's sewage farm, where every sense is gratified—in fact all the pleasures of the country are open to us.”

“Well, to my mind,” said Halford, “the pleasure of the country is to look at it from a very comfortable garden chair, such as I have seen specimens of in yonder alcove. To loaf and loll is what I always vote for.”

“You are precisely the sort of fellow a man in the country likes to have to stay with him,” exclaimed Blythe, approvingly; “just as a host in London hails the country guest who does not want to be taken to the Thames Tunnel and the Tower, so we bumpkins bless the man that doesn't want to see things.”

“You are making my Walter worse and worse, Mr. Halford, by falling in with his little ways,” said Mrs. Blythe, but in a tone that was by no means one of reproach. She might have been thanking him for making her son better and better, so eager was she that in all things he should be pleased. If she had been his grand-

mother and he but five years old, she could not have been more bent on "spoiling" her darling.

So the livelong summer morning was passed in dreamful ease, interspersed with fits and spurts of talking, and fondling of canine pets, under a canopy of tobacco smoke. Blythe, when he did speak, was as bright as ever; but it was plain that he had a mind preoccupied, and jested from the lips and not the heart. Luncheon, of course, took the important position that in the country it claims by right, and afterwards, as happened to the three little nigger boys in the ballad, "then there were two"—the host was missing from the alcove.

"What has become of Blythe, I wonder?" yawned Needham, already affected by the usual influences of lazing and the midday meal.

"He told me he had some business to transact that would take him away for an hour or two—I think at Mapleton."

"Business! and at Mapleton?" exclaimed Needham, with undisguised anxiety. "What on earth can that be about?"

"Well, you see, I was not his father confessor,

nor even his lawyer," replied Halford carelessly, "so I did not press him upon that point. He has left this box of excellent cigars behind him, and the hock and the ice and the seltzer water, details which really concern ourselves." Then, not perceiving a certain ominous silence that had fallen upon Needham, or perhaps purposely ignoring it, Halford proceeded to talk of Blythe. "It was very good of him to ask me down here, but, to say truth, my dear fellow, I should not have come had it not been for you. I have always admired him, and admitted the charm of his society, but I should not have relished his society alone; like even the best whisky, he seemed to my taste better mixed—that is in company—than neat. His own spirits are so high that they seem to demand something of a corresponding nature in others, and one is not at all times screwed up to concert pitch. Since I have seen him at home, however, I confess I begin to entertain a warmer feeling for him. That he would be an admirable host one expected; but his behaviour to his mother, whose devotion to him must be trying, because it sometimes places him in ridiculous positions, is really charming. I al-

ways credited him with generous impulses, but I think now he must have a good heart."

"I am sure of that," assented Needham eagerly.

"It is curious how often one sees that," continued Halford, tapping the ash from his cigar; "and in men who are utterly without what is called principle."

"You would almost seem to imply that Blythe is without principle," said Needham, with a faint smile; "which would be a very poor compliment to him."

"It is a complement to him, my dear fellow—spelt with an 'e'—the complement of his nature. Don't suppose that I am abusing our host in saying so; that would be ingratitude indeed. He can no more help it than you can help being without impulse, which is the birthright of *your* character. But, of course, his fault, especially as an idle man living in the country, is far the more dangerous one, and likely to get him into scrapes."

"I have always understood, though it is true I know little about the matter, that the country is

more free from perils of that kind than the town," observed Needham.

"That is so; but the country scrapes are much more serious ones. Country gentlemen, it is true, are not often entangled in them, but then they are not without occupation; they have the hare and the hound, and the gun, to amuse them, and their estates to look after; but with none of these things our friend concerns himself; he is an idle man, with plenty of means, which is almost as dangerous as being an idle man without them."

Halford made these observations from his lounging chair in the airy tone which a student of human nature adopts after a generous lunch, but it had more effect upon his companion than any lecture could have had, delivered from a chair of moral philosophy by a professor. There was an uneasy suspicion in his heart that this diagnosis of his host's character was only too accurate.

"Let us have a row on the river," he suddenly exclaimed.

"Well, since Blythe is not here to defend me from your exactions," answered the other with a yawn, "I suppose I must."

In a few minutes they were at the boat-house, in which lay quite a flotilla of pleasure-boats, and afloat on the cool stream. Needham's nature was one of those fortunate ones which find relief from anxiety in physical toil, and he soon recovered his spirits. He put his back into his work with a will.

"I don't mind being 'got round,' nor even wound round a little finger, when it's a pretty one," complained Halford, bitterly, "but I don't like being '*pulled* round;'" and this often happened. After a couple of hours of it, "I have now an appetite for my tea," he said; "one's recuperative powers in that way in the country are quite remarkable."

"I had no idea how late it was," remarked Needham, consulting his watch, as they turned home.

"Blythe will have an idea of it," replied Halford; "but on the other hand he will not let the tea-cakes grow cold; that is one of the things I admire him for, he is never so weak as to wait for late people."

When they reached the house, however, their

host had not arrived. Mrs. Blythe looked a little anxious, as she presided at the tea-table.

“Dear Walter is generally so punctual, I cannot think what has detained him.”

It was well for her that she could not. Needham often recalled the picture of that delicate old lady, so charmingly attired, and looking as appropriate to the tea service over which she presided as though she herself had been made of Dresden china; the comfortable conventional air; the proud yet pleased face, with the least shade of anxiety upon it, that was soon to be merged in the gloom of despair.

CHAPTER XIII.

TO MAPLETON.

SIX O'CLOCK came and still no Walter: up to that time Mrs. Blythe seemed to avoid the topic of his non-arrival, and only by her air of abstraction, accompanied by one of perpetually listening for outward sounds, betrayed her growing anxiety.

At last, suspense becoming incompatible with silence, "I cannot think," she said, in a piteous voice, yet as though the idea had only just struck her, "what has become of my dear boy."

For one so reticent and reserved to use such a tone, in the presence of those she had known so short a time, was significant indeed of her alarm. She looked, too, from one to the other of her two companions in a beseeching way, like one who asks for help, or at least hope, which went to both their hearts. Needham's tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; he was sick with vague apprehensions, to none of which he dared give expression.

"My dear Mrs. Blythe," said Halford, gently, "if your son had been going on the river, there might be some cause for fear; there is always danger on the water; but he has gone on foot to Mapleton, and in the broad daylight what accident could possibly happen to him? He has been detained, I suppose, rather longer than he expected."

"Yes, yes," she assented gratefully; "no doubt that is what has happened. Walter is so good-natured that he cannot say 'no,' and someone has pressed him to stop—I think I hear wheels, Mr. Needham; would you kindly open the door?"

Needham did so, and even went out into the hall for a few seconds, then returned, and shaking his head in token that he had no news, took a chair close to Halford. His face was deadly pale.

"Stop with her whilst I leave the room," he whispered presently, and then went out again. Though there had been no "wheels," he had met the butler in the hall waiting for an opportunity of getting speech with him.

"Something has happened to Master Walter, sir! Mr. Osborne has come over, and you must

see him first, before he sees poor mistress. I durst not go into the drawing-room to fetch you." The grave pompous man was thoroughly upset; not pleased, as some of his class are, with the sense of having tragic news to communicate, but full of awe and pity. He was still in the same spot when Needham came out again, not erect and stately as usual, but flabby in every limb, and trembling like a jelly. "Oh! sir, whatever will my poor mistress do?"

A question that indeed could not be answered.

"Where *is* Mr. Osborne?" inquired Needham, huskily. An experience, as he now well knew, lay before him that was altogether novel. He had been hitherto concerned with the cares and contingencies of life only; he was now to be acquainted with the much more serious issues that hang on Death, made doubly awful by its suddenness.

Mr. Osborne was awaiting him in the "study," Blythe's own room. He was standing, hat in hand, with a grave face, but instinct with human tenderness. Its conventional expression of ecclesiastical severity, his defence, perhaps, against

the frivolous, or those not given to pay reverence to his office, was gone.

"I am the bearer of bad news, Mr. Needham."

"So I feared, sir," the young man answered. The room seemed going round with him, while at the same time the tears sprang to his eyes. "A man's rare tears" with him were very rare; he was not given to displays of emotion.

The vicar looked at him very pitifully. "You were an intimate friend of Blythe's, I know," he said gently. "Death is always a shock to the young; it seems something with which they have nothing to do. That is only natural. But to another this will be a far deeper sorrow. I am come here, in virtue of my sacred calling, to break this news to his unhappy mother."

"God help her!" exclaimed Needham, fervently.

"I trust and pray He may," answered the other solemnly. Then, in another voice, he added, "The young man's body was found upon the Downs above Mapleton."

"Was it the heart?" inquired Needham, in an awe-struck voice.

"No; it was not the heart; I—" here the Vicar hesitated, a cloud came over his earnest face—"I am not in a position at present to say what was the cause of death; Dr. Rushout will make his report: but I fear it was a wound."

"A wound? Great Heaven! Do you mean that he was murdered?"

"Certainly not; I know nothing of my own knowledge; it is possible that he fell backwards on a stone."

"On the Downs? Impossible!"

"Do not let us go into that. What does it signify now to *him*? We must only think of his mother. How would it be best for me to see her?"

Mr. Osborne had come over upon an errand from which a man with a less keen sense of duty might well have shrunk, to break to a devoted mother the tidings of the death of her only son; but, while appreciating his conduct to the full, Needham would have preferred another messenger; the Vicar's wife for instance, or even Halford, whose gentleness of feeling was combined with judgment and resource. Mrs. Blythe and the Vicar, as he knew, had never

been in accord, and, however news may appal poor humanity, the news bringer counts for something. Still, it was this man's dreadful privilege to tell the thing.

Since it was so near the dinner hour, and Mrs. Blythe would be going upstairs to dress, Needham suggested that her maid should introduce the Vicar to her mistress's boudoir, which was next her bedroom. In case the shock should be too great for the poor lady, she could then be carried to her bed at once.

The Vicar thought it a wise precaution, and so it was arranged. As soon as their hostess had left the drawing-room Needham told his friend the dreadful news.

Halford threw up his hands and exclaimed, "My God, his mother!"

They stood looking at one another in appalled silence for a minute; then Halford said, "This poor lady will either be utterly prostrated by these tidings, in which case the doctor should be at hand, or she will want more news of him; she will say why have not one of you, who call yourselves his friends, gone at once to her boy.

To go or to stay is equally bad for us, but we must think of *her*."

"I am his oldest friend," said Needham, gently; "it is for me to go."

"Very good. My advice is to take the Victoria, and after you have got complete information of what has happened, bring the doctor back with you; it is only too likely he may be wanted."

It is something in favour of that much decried possession, wealth, that in times of crisis and catastrophe there are no obstacles to action; if one has means, the doctor can be sent for on the instant; the horse's speed, the electric current, are at our service; the heart may be torn with anxiety, but we are not fettered, as to our bodies, by lack of means. In some cases this may even make all the difference between life and death; it is said that life is not a thing that money can buy, but it is a thing that we may lose through lack of it, or preserve by possessing it.

At Stretton Park everything in the way of material appliance, including, of course, locomotion, was at hand. The conduct of affairs

seemed naturally to have devolved on Halford, and all the household, terrified and distracted, were very ready to acknowledge his sway; it was like a political revolution, when, for the moment, at all events, all decent people rejoice to see a strong man grasping the helm of state in the name of order. He rang the bell, and ordered the carriage round as though it had been his own, and in ten minutes (during which time an awful silence reigned above stairs) Needham was on his way to Mapleton. It was an experience altogether beyond the range of his limited horizon. The horses tore along the smooth road, unencumbered by traffic, and made the trees and hedges fly through the summer air; but there was no exhilaration for him in their headlong speed, nor could it keep pace with the hurrying thoughts that crossed his mind, like the dissolving scenes of a sheeted show. Blythe, of course, was the central figure, but Ella and Grey were its persistent companions. It was in their society he had first met him, the acknowledged light of it. How they had all admired and delighted in him; how constant had been the flow of his spirits, now congealed by the cold hand of death; how

bright the smile that had left his cold lips for ever! So brief a life, and yet long enough to make shipwreck of its nearest friendship. That would make his end doubly sad to the Martins. Found dead on the Downs; and killed there! the vicar had hinted—killed! Good heavens! who could have killed him, who never had an enemy in the world, except, alas! himself? Yet he could not have killed himself. So ran Needham's vague unceasing thoughts like the speculations of one who dreams.

He was wrapped up in them when the carriage drew up, with a suddenness that threw the horses on their haunches, at the doctor's door. The house was little larger than a cottage, with a lawn and garden sloping to the road, but it looked very picturesque in the evening light; a far different sort of residence from that, with its red fanlight flanked by "Night bell," to which we pay our anxious visits in town. On the other hand, what detracts from the more pastoral picture, the country doctor is generally away when we most want him, and his time of return unknown. As it happened, however, Dr. Rushout was at home. Needham sent in his card,

with "from Stretton Park" on it, lest his name should have escaped the doctor's memory, though he had been introduced to him on the preceding day; but for a minute or two he was detained in the dining-room, where the relics of the evening meal were still displayed.

Generally speaking, callers at that late hour were ushered at once into the consulting-room; but certain arrangements had to be made there for his reception. The doctor was not given to drink, yet he placed a bottle of brandy and a wine glass on the table, and then the lamp, so that it might throw his own face (which had an unusual hue of pallor on it) in the shade, and leave that of his visitor exposed to the light.

"Great heavens! what shall I say to him?" he murmured to himself, even though he had already bade the maid-servant show "the gentleman in." It was noticeable that he mentioned no name, in which he had an object, and at the same time forgot that the card must already have told her who his visitor was. Events had occurred within the last few hours of a nature to put the most sagacious of medical advisers off his head.

CHAPTER XIV.

WITH THE ACCUSED.

"I HAVE come from Stretton, Dr. Rushout, where dreadful news has been brought by Mr. Osborne."

"Yes, yes," said the Doctor nervously. "Take a chair, I beg. It is, indeed, terrible news. You are here upon your poor friend's mother's account, I conclude."

"Yes; she does not know of my coming; but it is necessary to get all the facts for her sake."

If the doctor's face had not been in the shadow something very like a spasm would have been seen to distort it, as he remained silent. "The worst we have heard is only too true, I conclude?" continued Needham.

"Walter Blythe is dead," said the Doctor; "it has been my unhappy duty to certify the fact. His body is now lying at 'The Bell' awaiting the

inquest which will take place to-morrow. Do you wish to see him?"

Needham shuddered. He had never looked on death; the idea of seeing that bright expressive face that he had beheld in its youth and vigour but a few hours ago, with life and thought gone out of it, appalled him.

"The poor lad looks quiet and calm enough; there will be nothing to shock you in the spectacle," said the other, divining his thoughts.

"It will not be necessary, will it? If I could do anything for him, Heaven knows——." Here he broke down. The doctor looked at him with anxiety; there were reasons why he regretted this young man's tenderness of heart. He misjudged it to be a sign of weakness.

"You are an old friend of Blythe's I understand?"

"Not an old one, but we have been a good deal together of late, and I always liked and admired him."

"And you know Robert Grey also?"

It seemed strange to Needham that the doctor should speak of any other at such a time save the dead man, but he answered, "Certainly;

indeed he is an older friend than poor Blythe was."

"And the family—you know his aunt and his cousin, I think?"

"Yes; I have a very great regard for all of them."

The doctor gave a little sigh of relief.

"Mr. Needham, I am going to tell you something that perhaps I ought not to tell, but I cannot help it; my regard for the family in question compels me to confide in you, who are also a friend of theirs; you must hold what I have to say, whether you act upon it or not, in the strictest confidence."

"That shall be so, I give you my honour," replied Needham, filled with vague alarm, not so much at his companion's words as his air and tone.

"You tell me that you have heard of our friend's death," resumed the doctor; "but you have not heard, I suppose, that he was murdered."

"Mr. Osborne hinted at the possibility of that being the case," gasped Needham; "but I put it from me as incredible."

"Nevertheless, it is true."

"Walter Blythe murdered? Why, how could such a man as that have an enemy? *Who* could have done it?"

"Ah, who indeed? It was not for gain, for his watch and money were untouched. Besides, the crime was committed in broad daylight, and though in a lonely place upon the Downs, one exposed to view."

"But how do you know that he was murdered? Might he not have fallen?"

"Then he must have fallen backwards, for the injury that caused his death was a wound at the back of his head. It was done with a stone, it is true, but not a jagged one; on the contrary, it was round and almost smooth, and, though very heavy, must have struck him with great force from behind; no fall could have made so huge a fissure," and the doctor, moved by the grim reminiscence, shivered. Then, as if ashamed of such a professional weakness, he added, in a tone which by comparison was almost indifferent, "Perhaps you would like to see the stone; it is a dumb witness, but bears only too certain a testimony to the nature of the deed. Captain Mitchell,

the county constable, would show it you;" but Needham, with a look of horror, held up his hand in protest.

"For Heaven's sake, no!"

"As you please. You are no doubt unused to such sights, but there are much worse things to be seen in this world, Mr. Needham, than a stone with a little blood on it."

"It is childish of me I admit," returned Needham humbly; "if I could do any good by going through an unpleasant ordeal, I hope I should not shrink from it, but——"

"That is well said, Mr. Needham," interrupted the Doctor, "and it reminds me of what I had to say to you, compared with which all that I have hitherto said fades into insignificance. There is an unpleasant ordeal awaiting you, from which I am sure, as you say, you will not shrink, since upon it depends—well, a great deal. Oblige me by taking this glass of brandy," and the doctor poured out a full one.

"Brandy? Why should I take brandy? It will make me drunk."

"No, it will not. You will take it because I, as a doctor, prescribe it; because I, as a man,

am about to entrust my honour to your hands, and they must be firm, not shaky hands, as they are now. You will take it because the task before you is a trying one, and requires the stimulant." It was curious how the speaker mingled his professional advice with hints at some matter of quite another kind, which was evidently taking him out of his usual groove.

Needham tossed off the brandy, and sat expectant of he knew not what. What *could* it be, compared with which what had happened on the Downs was, by comparison, "insignificant?"

"You must go to Robert Grey's lodgings at once, and if he is not at home, find him. It is a matter of life and death. Perhaps I should have done it myself," he added in half unconscious monologue. "And yet it is certain that I ought not. And I ought not to be sending you, my good lad; *facit per alium facit per se*: but your coming here was too great a temptation. Heaven help us, and forgive us all."

"But, what am I to say to Grey, Dr. Rushout?"

"Tell him from me—no, say from a true friend—that if his conscience reproaches him for

an evil deed, his sin has found him out. Tell him, in pity for the girl he thought to marry, if not for himself, to put the North Sea between himself and England. In Sweden only will he find safety. But, above all, let him leave this place while he is a free man—by the mail train to-night.”

“What? Am I to tell him to fly the country, as if he had committed a crime?”

“Yes; ‘as if’—would to Heaven I could say ‘as if’ as lightly as you do, for to my mind it is as certain as that you are sitting on that chair, that Walter Blythe’s death lies at Grey’s door.”

Needham started from his chair, as though by the action itself to contradict the speaker’s words; “It is a lie,” he exclaimed, “my life upon it, it is a lie.”

“That is what *I* should have said a few hours ago, my friend; but I cannot say it now,” replied the Doctor, with a groan. “But whether it be a lie (as Heaven grant it is) or not, we are losing time. Go, and do as I bid you. Then as to his guilt or his innocence, judge for yourself.”

“I have judged already,” said Needham, con-

fidently. "Whatever evidence you may have to the contrary, it is untrustworthy. It has been said that every man has within him the makings of a murderer; but of a murder of this kind—a cowardly blow from behind—Grey is utterly incapable."

The Doctor only answered with a faint and painful smile, and hurried him to the door; and off he drove to Grey's lodgings, with the address of which Mrs. Blythe's coachman was acquainted.

In reply to Needham's eager inquiry, the landlady said that Mr. Grey was at home, but was just going out to spend the evening, and unless "it was very particular" would not like to be disturbed.

Needham knew whither his friend was going as well as she did, and the tidings gave his sinking spirits an additional pang. It was impossible, indeed, with such a crime as was imputed to him on his conscience, that Grey could be going to the Martins, which it was doubtless his intention to do; so far the fact would have been assuring had Needham needed assurance; but it suggested to him the thought of the horror in

Ella's peaceful breast, when, in a few hours at the most, the hateful charge, of which he had been made the confidant, should be brought against her loved one.

He sent his name, and was at once admitted, and informed that his friend would be with him in a few minutes; in the meantime he was left in a handsome room on the first floor, commanding a view of the river, and furnished in a manner very characteristic of its tenant. Its walls were lined with books, chiefly volumes of the ancient Classics, and many of them gorgeously bound and stamped with the arms and motto of St. Boniface, or of those earlier seminaries of learning of which the owner had been so distinguished an alumnus. Needham remembered to have seen most of them in Grey's rooms at Cambridge, from which they had been removed to Mapleton on his taking his degree. The idea of this diligent and brilliant scholar being guilty of the dire crime which had just been described to him seemed more preposterous to Needham than ever amid such surroundings; and but for the remembrance of the doctor's pleading face, and of the eagerness of his tone, he would have given up

his mission then and there. Indeed, it was while he was pondering upon the question as to whether that pregnant warning should be delivered or not, that a space in the very bookcase he was looking at—a masked door communicating with the next room—was suddenly disclosed, and Grey himself stood before him. Needham drew back startled, less by the unexpected occurrence than by the changed appearance of the man he had seen but a few hours ago. His ruddy cheeks were pale and haggard, his brows puckered as though care-worn, his eyes heavy and sad, with the light of youth gone out of them.

“This is kind of you, Needham,” he said, as he held out his hand; “the sight of an old friend is indeed welcome to me just now.” The very voice of the man was changed, and even the words he used were not in accordance with his nature, which, as Needham knew, though kind, was the reverse of sentimental. Then, walking rapidly up and down the room, he exclaimed, “Great Heaven! what things have happened within the last six and twenty hours!”

Needham stared at him in speechless wonder.

“Aye; you are only thinking of the last six,”

continued Grey; "you do not know—how should you know?—of what preceded them. That one's friend should be dead is bad enough, but to find that he was a false friend, a hypocrite, a would-be seducer!"

"Grey! Grey! poor Blythe is dead!" cried Needham, reproachfully. "And, besides, that is not true; he was no seducer."

"What? When he tried to seduce Ella from me, my betrothed wife? Though for her sake I have forgiven him, do you think I can forget it? Priests may be made that way, Needham, though I doubt it, but not men. If ever man died in mortal sin, so far as thought is concerned, that man died in it."

Such strength of conviction lay in the speaker's words that Needham felt it would have been idle to argue with him.

"Heaven help us," he answered gently, "if every thought that stains our souls should be counted as a deed."

"True, true," replied Grey, with a groan, "for in that case I have been a murderer, not for six, but for six and twenty hours."

Needham's tongue clove to the roof of his

mouth. Was it possible that his ears had thus heard a confession of murder from Grey's own lips?

"I had suspected it for a long time," continued Grey, in a slow monotonous tone, like one who talks with himself, "though I fought against conviction. It seemed impossible that the friend of my youth whom I myself had introduced to her, and as it were recommended to her very heart, should play a part so base; but he did play it. Ask Ella herself."

Needham shook his head and held out a remonstrant hand. The idea of such an interrogation was shocking to him. "My dear Grey, it is incredible. There may have been circumstances which seemed suspicious"——

"There *were*," the other interrupted scornfully; "ask Rushout."

Needham's heart sank within him. The Doctor then had at least good cause for his warning. It must have been of his own personal knowledge that he had said Grey was in danger.

"Do you think it wise to stay here?" said Needham tentatively.

"To stay here? Why not? What record can

ever leap to light that could touch Ella? Of course we shall stay here; I would not move hence, nor have her move, though it were to marry me to-morrow."

Confidence of assertion, rigidity of determination, were in every word and look. Needham felt that his mission, however urgent, however necessary, had already failed. Still, he made another effort, gave another note of warning.

"There will be an inquest to-morrow," he said, significantly.

"Well, of course. And I shall be called, and made to tell all, no doubt. I am endeavouring to brace myself up for that terrible ordeal. The result you will say, to look at me," he added bitterly, "is not encouraging. That is so. I feel as though it were better to die—to give up all at once—than to go through with it. But it must be done for Ella's sake. I am going to her now; she suffers, Great Heaven, how she suffers! all through that dead man lying yonder," and he pointed in the direction of the inn. "God forgive him; it is easier for Him to do so than for me." He moved towards the door mechanically, with his eyes cast on the ground; then suddenly came

back and held out both his hands. "God bless you, Needham; you are a friend indeed, and a friend in need. If you had been tried, as perhaps this man was tried (I try to think that it was a temptation he could not resist—I do, indeed!) you would not have behaved as he did. I thank you for coming to see me in this bitter hour; I will tell her, and she will thank you too."

The next moment Needham was alone; he heard his friend's quick step upon the stairs, and the front door close behind him. His mission had failed; but had there been any need for it? That was the question that troubled his aching heart, and filled it with anxious solicitude. He had started on his errand in full confidence of his friend's innocence; but, though by no means convinced of his guilt, he was not so confident now. Grey's own words, "In that case I have been a murderer, not for six, but for six and twenty hours," had shaken his faith to its foundations.

CHAPTER XV.

BREAKING IT.

IMPORTUNATELY as the crime that had deprived him of his host and friend pressed upon Needham's mind, as he drove back to Stretton Park, the subject that chiefly occupied it just now was the dead man's mother. What a tale had he to tell her, and what a still more terrible one might possibly have to be told her on the morrow! The conventionality of her character (as he read it) seemed to increase the horror of the position; the smoothness of her way of life, which had never yet met with kink or jar; the artificiality of her opinions and of her mode of existence; the ease and luxury with which she had been surrounded from her cradle; all these things contrasted with the catastrophe that had befallen her, and made it, to Needham's view, more striking and abhorrent. In the extremes of wretchedness there are still comparisons. To turn even a peasant woman

inured to hardship out on a winter's night from her warm home would be a cruel act, but to drive forth a delicate creature in her ball dress on the frozen snow would be still more brutal. It was something of this kind that he was about to be compelled to do.

Never in his life had he borne to any fellow-creature such a message of ill as he now carried with him; and never had he known a human being so ill calculated to receive it. Dr. Rushout, he said to himself, would have arrived before him, and he almost hoped that the calamity he had at first so feared, had happened to the poor lady—some fit or stroke, which, however it prostrated her, would make her unconscious of her misery. Then, with a perfect tumult of terror, it struck him that the doctor would *not* have arrived; that the very purpose for which Halford had despatched him to Mapleton had not been accomplished; for the moment he had thought that it had been, and now he remembered that it had not. The terrible tidings imparted to him by Dr. Rushout had driven out of his mind the very errand on which he had gone to him, namely, to dispatch him at once to Stretton. Indeed, he had

of course intended to bring him back with him in the carriage. Nothing could have exhibited, even to himself, the utter prostration of his faculties as this inexcusable omission. What a nervous fool and coward he had been! How differently would the cool and sagacious Halford have behaved had he been in his place; next to seeing Mrs. Blythe herself he shrank from the shame of meeting *him*. He would have returned and fetched the doctor even then, but that the speedy steeds had already brought him to the lodge gates, and there was nothing for it but to press on. He had sense enough left to tell the coachman to drive to the stable yard that no disturbance should be caused at the front door. The "back settlements," as poor Blythe used to call them, were crowded with anxious-eyed domestics, who regarded him with dumb anxiety as he passed through them. He spoke only to the butler: "How is your mistress?" "I don't know, sir; no news has come to us from above stairs. Mr. Osborne has gone, and Mr. Halford is waiting for you in the drawing-room."

And there he found him, pacing up and down the room, along a pathway he had made

by pushing the gorgeous furniture to left and right.

"Have you brought the doctor?" were his first words, which sent a shiver of dismay through Needham's frame.

"No, I have not."

"I am glad of it," replied Halford, in a tone of relief that found an echo in the other's breast. "She would not have seen him if he had come. She will see nobody but ourselves, because we were friends of her poor Walter. How strange it seems——however, that can wait. Now tell me what you have found out about this dreadful matter." Then throwing himself into a chair, for he was thoroughly unnerved and exhausted, Needham told him all.

"Great Heavens! What a muddle it is!" was the unexpected comment when he had finished. "How true it is that the farce of life treads on the heels of tragedy. This doctor of yours must be an idiot."

"Not at all. A very sensible fellow; and with a kind heart."

"Then you believe his story?"

"Two hours ago I should have said it was in-

credible. Now—well, I don't know what to believe," groaned Needham.

Halford rang the bell. "Is Mr. Needham's dinner ready?" "Yes, sir." Halford took his friend's arm and led him into the dining-room; then, dismissing the servant, he poured out a glass of wine for his friend and helped him to some meat. "Eat first, and speak afterwards," he said. It was curious to see how this guest of a day had taken command of the whole house, including its visitor. "Now, just because it may be a satisfaction to yourself," he remarked presently, "let me say that I don't believe this doctor's story. There is something in it, no doubt—I am afraid something very serious. But what we must start with and stick to, however matters may point to the contrary, is that whoever murdered Walter Blythe—if he *was* murdered—it was not our friend Robert Grey."

"You feel sure of that?"

"If all my life has not gone for nothing, so far as the observation of human nature is concerned, I feel sure of that. He might have murdered him (as the law would say) in any

other way, but not by a blow from behind. I will take my oath of that."

"God bless you! you are a true friend," said Needham, holding out his hand. He felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his heart; for the first time for the last hour he could breathe freely.

"Nay, I am not such a true friend—of Grey's at least—as you are; for, if I am not mistaken, you would stick to him even if he had committed this crime. Your doubt, in reality, did you credit; so you need not be ashamed of it. It was caused by the excuses you made for him for the temptation to which he was exposed, and which you know more about than I do."

Needham's face, which had been very pale, turned scarlet.

"Blythe himself told me your secret yesterday, but now it has passed into safer keeping. It is *that*, my dear Needham, which has upset *you*, and prevented you from taking the view of things to which your natural intelligence would have led you. It is necessary in this frightful calamity that we should thoroughly understand

one another; but upon this subject (so far as you are concerned with it) I shall never speak again."

"Thank you," said Needham gently.

"When you see our poor hostess do not touch upon the murder theme unless you cannot help it; though I am not sure the parson did not do so. And as for the doctor's view—that Grey had something to do with it—it will be time to meet that when the charge is made."

"It *will* be made," said Needham mournfully.

"Then Heaven help us, and, above all, this unhappy woman. Now you must go and see her."

Then he rang for Mrs. Blythe's maid, a pleasant-faced young woman—for the old lady had liked all things nice about her—who, though she had evidently been weeping, had done it decorously, and with as little damage to her bright eyes as possible. Heaven knows how she had found the time for it; for she had been in sedulous attendance on her mistress—but she had already donned a black dress, which fitted her to a nicety and became her admirably. It

was wasted upon Needham, who at no time was very heedful of such things, but that was not her fault.

"How *is* your mistress?" he inquired, as he followed her noiselessly upstairs.

"Better than you are prepared for, sir," she said. "To those who don't know her she seems a miracle."

Needham could scarcely be said to be "prepared" for anything just then, but what he expected was certainly to find his hostess in the last stage of mental and bodily prostration. This was, however, by no means the case. On entering the boudoir, he was astonished to see Mrs. Blythe sitting in her armchair, in her usual upright position, and, except that her face was deadly pale, without any alteration in her appearance. Indeed, what alteration there was, if he had had eyes to see it, was the absence of change, for she had not substituted an evening for a morning gown—a circumstance that had not happened to her for a quarter of a century. Her eyes, though their expression was softer and gentler than usual, wore no trace of tears. "You may leave the room, Wilcox," were her

first words, delivered with her usual quiet dignity; and the maid retired accordingly. Then looking at her visitor steadfastly, but speaking with a certain painfulness and effort, she said: "Have you seen my boy, Mr. Needham?"

For the moment he thought her wits had left her; she seemed to be asking about him as though nothing had happened; but there was a twitching in her poor old face (which he now perceived to have become not white but grey) and a depth of pathos in her eyes, which forbade him to retain that view.

"No, dear Mrs. Blythe," he answered. "I have not seen him; I—I could not do it!"

"I like you none the less for that," she replied gently. "It is very natural. You wished to keep the memory of him in your mind as you always knew him; so beautiful and bright; 'life and thought, *not* gone away side by side;' he learned that poem once to please me. It was a sort of comfort to me when his father died; but nothing comforts me now; not even *this*," and she touched a book that lay upon her lap—the Bible. "But a mother, you see, is different; I want to see him. You weep for me, good friend

of his and mine, and I thank you for it. Perhaps if I could weep it would be better. That is what Mr. Osborne said. He is a good man, too, in his way; but I do not want him here—he did not love my boy as you did. I only wish to see those who loved my boy.”

“Everyone did who knew him, Mrs. Blythe; he was the light of us all.”

“Yes, yes; and a good son; the best of sons, Mr. Needham. Why do they not bring him home?” Here she gave a pitiful moan. “It is not much for a mother to ask of One who is called merciful.”

“They will bring him home to-morrow, dear Mrs. Blythe. It is necessary to first hold the inquest.”

“Where is that to be?”

“At the inn.”

“And where is he now? In Heaven, I know, though Mr. Osborne only hoped it. I mean his poor body.”

“It lies at the inn.”

“They *knew* him there and liked him. That is something——Mr. Needham I have a favour to ask of you.”

"It is granted."

"That is kind of you. I asked it of another awhile ago, and though he granted it, he first asked what it was. That is the difference between a friend—for he *is* a friend—and a true friend. What I want you to promise me is not to leave this house—just at present that is. It is no longer a pleasant house to be in. The light of it (as you have just said) is gone out, and never will its spark be restored; still I trust that you and Mr. Halford—his two true friends—will stay here, a few days at least."

"We will stay as long as we can be of the least service to you."

She gave him a sad but grateful smile.

"My boy always told me you were a good man, genuine, sterling. I have not thought enough of such matters. Now I have been taught better, though by a harsh master. I have not treated you as you deserve."

"Indeed you have, dear Mrs. Blythe, and better. Do not think of such imaginary things."

"Better so, than to think of real things," she answered, with what was meant for a smile. "I do not feel very strong just now." She leaned

back in her chair for the first time. "Call Wilcox, please."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. LEE.

"How wonderfully calm our poor hostess is," observed Needham, as he took his seat by Halford in the smoking-room. "I had expected something very different."

"Yes; she is, I fear, somewhat too calm," answered the other gravely.

"You think it is the calmness of despair. She told me, poor soul, that she could not weep."

"That is the worst sign of all; but what I meant was rather that the storm is to come. She has braced herself in certainly a most unexpected manner to meet this catastrophe; but all her reserves, so to speak, have been called out to do it. She has nothing left to stand against what is still to come."

"You mean the news of how Blythe came by his end?"

Halford nodded, and gazed abstractedly at his pipe, as his custom was when thinking out anything, as though the solution lay in its glowing bowl.

"You think she will then utterly break down?"

"I don't say that, but I foresee trouble. It is so unfortunate that Grey should be mixed up in it."

"Unfortunate! It is most shocking and abominable."

"No doubt. I was only thinking of its possible effect upon this poor lady. Well, we must wait for events; it is not alone the unexpected that happens; things often turn out exactly contrary to what one has expected. I suppose Mrs. Blythe has asked you to remain here; she asked me."

"So I gathered from what she said, and also that you had complied with her request."

"I said I would stay here as long as she pleased," answered Halford.

There was a dryness in his tone which attracted the other's attention. "You think she may change her mind?" he said.

"It is very possible. If it is generally believed that Grey murdered her son, she will not be well disposed towards Grey's friends who don't believe it."

"Let us hope she will not be so unreasonable."

"By all means. And also, since you will not smoke, let us be off to our beds; you look as if you needed rest."

"I confess I am as tired as a dog," said Needham.

"Then let us hope you will sleep like one. Good night, my dear boy."

"Good night, old fellow."

These familiar terms had a much greater significance to them than the "old chappie" of metropolitan converse has with those who use it. There was true friendship between them, which the difference in their years rather strengthened than otherwise. They were as an elder brother and a younger, but (as too often happens in that relation) with no antagonism of interests. Moreover, in the present crisis it was an unspeakable comfort to Needham to have so capable an ally at hand, a man who, as poor Blythe had

said, could be relied upon "when one was in a hole."

Notwithstanding the anxieties which agitated his mind Needham slept soundly; indeed, when he did wake it was not at first to the actual circumstances of his position. The portentous gloom of the valet, however, at once recalled it. He did not leave the room, as usual, after he had laid out his clothes, but hung about the dressing-table, waiting to be questioned; Needham, however, did not understand the ways of valets, so at last the man had to speak.

"There's bad news come from Mapleton, sir, I'm sorry to say; leastway if, as I believe, Mr. Grey is a friend of yours."

"What about Mr. Grey?"

"Well, sir, they do say he's been took up for the murder of our young master."

"It is a lie, sirrah, but one that if it reached your mistress's ears would do a great deal of harm," exclaimed Needham excitedly.

"That may be, sir, and, of course, we all hope it is; but one cannot stop folks' tongues from wagging. He throwed stones at him, it

is said, and broke in his 'ead, poor young gentleman."

"How Blythe himself would have laughed at this!" was the incongruous thought that thrust itself on Needham's mind. But the tidings were serious enough, and, of course, except for the swiftness with which rumour had sped, not unexpected. His first impulse was to see Wilcox. The maid never called her mistress till the morning was far advanced, and there would be plenty of time to warn her; but he forgot that all things were out of joint in that house of mourning. Her maid was already closeted with Mrs. Blythe, who, indeed, had never retired to bed at all. He made his way through the gloom and silence to the breakfast-room, where he found Halford already awaiting him.

"Of course she knows it," was the reply when he told his tale; "every one knows it who has ears by this time. You must do what you can with her, and your task, I hope—though that does not sound friendly—will be harder than mine. What sort of man is this Mr. Fanshawe? I think I remember his name."

And he put a note into Needham's hands.

"Dear Sir,—I am requested by my client, Mr. Robert Grey, to ask you to be so good as to come over here at once, upon a matter of the most urgent importance. He is in custody upon a very serious charge.

"Yours truly,

"HERBERT FANSHAWE."

"Good Heavens, already!" exclaimed Needham, with a groan. "I know nothing of the man except that he is a lawyer, stiff and formal in manner, but, as I heard, well thought of."

"It is not a bad letter," said Halford, thoughtfully; "there is nothing to alarm us, remember, more than there was last night. It's the first move in the game, that's all."

"A game of life and death," observed Needham ruefully. "I will go with you, of course."

"Certainly not; you can be of no use to Grey at present, and you can be of great use here. Moreover, if you did go, it would destroy your usefulness. I shall have to tell him how things stand exactly. Of course, the poor fellow wants me to defend him. You may well say that I am incompetent, or at all events rusty,

but I think I may do for a coroner's jury. It is only natural that he should prefer me to a 'local' who would be a stranger."

"He is very right in so doing," said Needham earnestly. "I was not hesitating—if I seemed to hesitate—about that at all. But I must go to Mapleton."

"You are thinking of the Martins. Let me beg of you not to see them, at least to-day. I will see them myself, and explain matters. Our first duty, it is true, is to the living—that is to Grey himself, but after that to the dead man; all we can do for *him* is to help his poor mother. If we both left her this morning, for Grey's sake, she would go out of her mind. That is my firm belief from what I saw of her yesterday."

"But what will the Martins think of my keeping aloof from them in this hour of bitter trial?" cried Needham despairingly.

"They will think of you—well, as *I* think of you, my good fellow," said Halford, laying his hand on the other's shoulder. "Duty first and sentiment afterwards. The inversion of these terms has spoilt the life of the man who is

speaking to you. That is no matter now," he added hastily; "I only mention it to enforce the argument."

Under any other circumstances this confession would have awakened curiosity in Needham's mind, but it was now monopolised by more serious matters.

"For to-day," he said with a sigh, "I will do your bidding, but remember, Halford, as regards these unhappy folks, my dearest friends, my honour is in your hands."

"I will guard it as my own," answered the other impressively. "You will have plenty to do here, independently of looking after our poor hostess. No doubt Blythe will be brought home to-day. There will be arrangements for the funeral to be made. It will be sadder work even than mine; but each to his task. Now I must be off."

The distressing tedium of that day Needham never forgot. The impossibility of fixing his mind on anything, or preventing it from straying to the most painful subjects; the gloom of the house, within and without; the scared look of the servants; the watching for that dreadful sound

upon the gravelled sweep—these were things that for years afterwards brought their shadow with them. Mrs. Blythe, however, did not send for him; that was some comfort. It was an interview from which no good could come, and would be as embarrassing as it would be painful. It was not till late in the afternoon that the body arrived. A room had been prepared for it, and the garden and conservatory ransacked by his orders to adorn it with flowers. It is doubtful whether the incongruity of such a custom does not outweigh its piety; but, at all events, it seemed to Needham that he was doing *something* for his dead friend, however bootless. The face, as he bent over it, looked very calm and peaceful, and showed no signs of its owner having died by violence. He was in the act of placing a cross of beautiful flowers on the breast, when the door opened and Mrs. Blythe entered. She walked with a steady step to the bed on which her son was lying, stooped down and kissed him. “My only son!” she murmured; “and murdered!” Needham was moving softly to the door, when, in a firm but gentle voice, she addressed him, “Why should you go? You and I are his only friends.” Then, as

if submitting to an impulse she would have resisted, she fell on her knees by the dead man, and burst into a passion of tears. After a while she rose, and, looking at Needham, whose own eyes were not dry, she said, "We must not be weak, we two. We have work to do for *him*." She pointed to the body. "We cannot bring him to life, but we can bring his murderer to justice."

"That will be done," said Needham gently; "if indeed he *was* murdered."

"Oh, cruel! Would you have me, his mother, lift up his dear head, and point out in evidence the hand that killed him? Do you suppose I do not know all? A foul, a felon's blow; and it is *not* so sure that justice will be done. The man he thought his friend has become a traitor."

"If you mean Halford, that is not true, Mrs. Blythe; I say it in the presence of the dead."

"And in the presence of the dead," she answered fiercely, "I say you lie." Then, with passionate penitence, she added, "Forgive me, sir; for I know not what I say. I must be mad indeed to quarrel with you, his only friend. I

cannot expect you to think as I think, to know as I know. Time will show the truth. I have confidence in you, Mr. Needham, whatever happens. But that man—Mr. Halford—must not come here again. I will not have one who is helping my boy's murderer to escape from justice under the same roof with me."

"I will let him know what you say, Mrs. Blythe," said Needham gravely. "He will hold you blameworthy just now for nothing; but a day will come when you will be sorry for those words."

"No day will come when I shall not be sorry," she answered bitterly. "Nothing is left to me now but to see justice done."

The vigour of the woman, however misdirected, was amazing; her desire for something very like vengeance seemed for the moment to have monopolized her mind and numbed her sense of loss. Perhaps it was better so, as regarded her physical condition, but Needham was shocked by so unexpected a spectacle. He remembered, however, that Halford had foreshadowed it in his promise to stay at Stretton "so long as his hostess

pleased;" how confident he had felt in his reading of her character when he made that condition was evident from the fact that when Needham gave orders for the transmission of his friend's luggage to Mapleton, he found that he had taken it with him.

It was strange that he had no word from him; more than once he had heard the clatter of horses' feet from the stable yard, but, as he now justly concluded, if messages had come from Mapleton they had been sent to his hostess, who indeed seemed well acquainted with all that was going on there. His sole comfort in so much anxiety was his confidence in Halford's intelligence. He had never quite believed, after he had got to know him, his story about his failure at the bar; if failure there had been, the cause he had assigned for it—incapacity—was surely not the true one. Had he been witness to the meeting between Halford and Mr. Fanshawe that morning this view would have been amply corroborated.

"Why, surely," were the first words of the solicitor, "I have seen your face in town, sir. Am I not addressing Mr. Lee?"

"I *was* once Mr. Lee," was the cold reply; "but I changed my name for Halford."

"I hope for a good reason—the usual reason," said Mr. Fanshawe with a deferential smile.

"It seemed to me a good reason at the time," replied Halford; then added, with evasive abruptness, "But that is not what I came here to talk about. I gather from your letter that this is a serious as well as a most distressing business."

"It is most serious; I should have said five minutes ago, and also most difficult, but with your help, Mr. Lee—I would say Mr. Halford—I trust to pull our client through. There is no one against us of any consequence—no one at least fit to measure himself——"

"Let us leave compliments and get to business, Mr. Fanshawe," interrupted the other drily. And to business they went accordingly.

CHAPTER XVII.

BAD NEWS.

As "the disastrous day" wore on at Stretton Park news began to drop in from Mapleton, but nothing authentic. Rumour, as usual, was certain on this and that point, till she contradicted herself; made mountains out of molehills, and lied at large. What seemed established was that the inquest was lasting throughout the day, and would be adjourned to the next, which of itself was no good sign. At last a note came from Halford, hurriedly written from Mr. Fanshawe's house, where it seemed he was putting up.

"Dear N.—We have had what poor Blythe would have called a trying day. My opinion remains as I expressed it to you, but the case of the other side is far stronger than I had anticipated. It is quite possible the matter will have to go elsewhere—that is to the assizes. Come

over to me here to-morrow morning for an early breakfast. G. bears everything like a man—and an innocent man.

“Yours ever,

“P. L. HALFORD.”

That letter, so long looked for, cost Needham his night's sleep. What it said was bad enough, but what it did not say filled him with still more anxious apprehensions. He could understand that Halford was pressed for time, and doubtless much fatigued; but why was there not one syllable about the Martins? Was it possible that he had had no opportunity of communicating with them, in which case what must they think of his own silence and absence? It was no wonder that sleep fled from his eyes. So wretched did he feel indeed when the tardy daylight dawned, and so impatient to know the worst, that what Mrs. Blythe might think of him no longer troubled him; the greater anxiety drove out the lesser; for no consideration on earth would he now have delayed his going to Mapleton.

It was a similar glorious morning to that on which he had found Blythe walking by the river;

but its beauties gave him no pleasure now, and indeed only impressed him with Nature's complete indifference to the sorrows of our race. What terrible things had happened within those few days, and yet the sun was shining and the birds were singing, as though there were no such things as Death and Disgrace in the world. The idea of waiting until the household were up, was intolerable to him, and he started off to walk to Mapleton over the downs—the very road he had taken with the murdered man on the day of the picnic. Every step of it recalled his presence, and filled him with its ghastly memory. At some point, he knew not where, he must be passing over the very spot where the poor fellow had met his end. What struck him forcibly everywhere was the entire absence of the weapon, if it could be called such, to which he owed his death. It seemed to him that the murderer, whoever he was, must have carried the stone with him, with “malice aforethought” to commit the crime.

When he reached the village only a few people were astir; he had arrived much before his time, but he saw Dr. Rushout dismounting from his horse at his garden gate, no doubt

returning from some urgent case; indeed, to judge from his countenance, which was very grave and sad, it might have been a fatal one.

Needham stopped him, and asked to be directed to Mr. Fanshawe's.

"You are come after Mr. Halford?" said the other, questioning him in his turn.

"Yes; to my surprise he tells me that he is staying at Mr. Fanshawe's."

"Well, it appears they were old acquaintances; Fanshawe tells me your friend was once a great man at the bar, but threw up his profession, and even changed his name, in consequence of a quarrel—about nothing at all—with a judge in court. Oh, Mr. Needham, why did you not take my advice, and warn your friend to fly while there was yet time?"

"Because an innocent man has no need to fly," returned Needham coldly.

"I would to Heaven he may prove his innocence," replied the Doctor gravely. "In giving my evidence yesterday, though there was no help for it, I felt as though I were putting the rope round his neck. If wits can help him, Mr.

Halford is the man to do it; but our friend, I fear, is in evil case."

"How do they bear it at the Fishery," inquired Needham, in low and broken tones.

"With admirable courage; to-day's doings will, however, be a dreadful ordeal for her—I mean for Miss Ella."

"Will she have to give evidence in court?"

"I fear so. But we had better not be seen talking together, Mr. Needham. Everyone knows on which side my sympathies are, though my tongue has been forced to speak on the other. The big red house with the portico, next but one to the inn, is Mr. Fanshawe's."

At the lawyer's residence the household had already risen, for an unusual excitement pervaded it, and Needham was ushered at once into a back parlour, where he found Halford knee deep in copies of depositions.

"This is good of you, indeed!" he exclaimed, grasping his friend's hand. "Fanshawe said you would never be here by eight, and it is scarcely seven."

"I could have been here just as easily by five," said Needham, a little reproachfully.

"What! No sleep, I suppose? Well, you look wonderfully fresh and well, nevertheless. You can send the carriage back, for we shall want you here all day."

"I walked," said Needham sententiously.

"That's bad; you should not have taken so much out of yourself; you have a hard day's work before you."

"I am glad of that; anything but inaction. How goes it with poor Grey?"

"With *him* well enough, better than one could have hoped for; he is true grit; but with his case not so well. The burden of suspicion, one must admit, is very heavy. In a few words this is what it comes to: He was the last man seen with Walter Blythe. They were on the Downs together, and had a quarrel there. Grey met him coming over to Mapleton, and, according to his own statement, threatened him with violence if he persisted in a certain purpose, namely, to force an interview upon Ella Martin. Grey says after certain high words had passed between them, Blythe turned back towards Stretton Park, and he saw no more of him. In a few hours afterwards the man is found dead on

the very spot where he admits he left him, killed by a blow from a stone on the back of his head. Dr. Rushout's evidence, given with obvious unwillingness, which makes it worse, is very damaging. Grey meets him on the morning of the fatal event, and puts certain questions regarding what took place at a picnic on the preceding day. On finding Blythe had been alone with the young lady, and not (as had been represented to him) in the doctor's company, he used the expression 'D——n the fellow! if he shows his face here again I'll kill him!' The mere passionate outbreak of a jealous man, no doubt, but the words went home to the jury. There is a good deal of miscellaneous evidence tending towards guilt, and very little in the opposite direction. The public feeling is strongly against the accused, notwithstanding his high character and previous popularity; but that, at least, may, I hope, be remedied. Miss Ella is a general favourite; her youth and beauty will do much for us, and on the whole her testimony will not be damaging. The case against us is conducted in a feeble and half-hearted fashion, and I still hope we may scrape through."

"Scrape through," echoed Needham dismally. What unbecoming words they seemed to apply to such a case. How frightful to think that this was the best that could be said concerning a man hitherto blameless, the beloved of an innocent girl and the pride of his college and of his friends, but who all on a sudden had been accused of the most odious of crimes.

"Don't think me brutal, Needham," said Halford, perceiving how he had shocked his friend, "you must picture me as having my wig on; it is absolutely necessary you should know how we stand, 'without fear or favour,' as the phrase goes. Grey has expressed to me his complete confidence in your good sense, as well as friendship, and I am sure you will not disappoint him. He trusts his betrothed to you—to see her through this painful ordeal, and to say what you think best to her—as to a brother."

Needham bowed his head, and murmured "Heaven help me;" he had no need to add "and keep me out of temptation," for he was far too good a fellow to be in danger from it; else in some men's ears the devil might have

whispered "since Blythe is dead, and Grey may be removed from this earthly scene, there will be only one man left who loves this girl." What oppressed him was no thought of evil, but the sense of responsibility.

"And now," continued Halford cheerfully, "let us to breakfast." He led the way into another room, where an excellent meal awaited them. As they were doing justice to it Mr. Fanshawe entered from without; he had been already abroad upon the matter in hand.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Needham, though our cause of meeting is not so pleasant as on the last occasion. I am sorry to say I bring bad news, Mr. Halford. Sykes came down last night, special, for the prosecution."

"I am not surprised," said Halford coolly. "This is Mrs. Blythe's handiwork, no doubt," he added, turning to Needham; "a very remarkable woman." He spoke in a tone of unqualified admiration, which rather jarred on Needham's ears.

"I do not thank her, if it be to her that we owe this increase of our difficulties," he replied drily; "especially since it also means an increase of danger to poor Grey."

“Now that is the difference between a partisan and an advocate,” observed Halford smiling. “Yesterday I should have echoed your sentiments; to-day I do not withhold my respect from the efforts of an adversary whom it is nevertheless my business to confound. ‘My son has been murdered,’ says this unhappy lady, ‘and I will at least leave no stone unturned to avenge him.’ As there is only one accused person she concludes he is the guilty man, and holds those who would befriend him as her personal enemies.”

“As regards yourself, she does indeed; I am sorry to say,” interpolated Needham.

“Why should you be sorry? It is perfectly natural and even to her credit. There is a vigour about that woman’s character which nothing short of a catastrophe would have developed, and which I admire exceedingly. When she is found to be in the wrong she will say so; a prophecy one would not venture to make of one woman in fifty.”

“Heaven grant that she may live to make that confession,” observed Needham earnestly.

“Amen,” responded Halford cheerfully. “Now

take a pipe to quiet your nerves, and then go across to 'The Fishery.' Mr. Fanshawe and I have had our plan of proceedings a little upset by the arrival of this eminent and learned gentleman, and shall have to re-arrange it. We will send over for you when you are wanted at the court-house without fail."

A week ago it had seemed to Needham impossible that he should ever voluntarily cross the threshold of Ella Martin's house; he was about to do so upon an errand which would not only have seemed impossible, but monstrous as the offspring of a nightmare. The inspired pen which wrote "We know not what a day may bring forth" did not err on the side of exaggeration—the work of a minute often suffices to alter the whole tenour of our lives.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FISHERY.

IN the pleasant garden at the Fishery, as Needham passed through it, he noticed quite a number of birds collected by an open window on the second floor, and others upon the trees and shrubs. The gardener, who was engaged in his usual avocation, noticed his wondering look and observed, "They're a waiting for their breakfasts, sir; but Miss Ella ain't down yet." This simple statement encouraged him in two ways: it showed him that the recent catastrophe had not as yet had such serious consequences as he feared, and it postponed his dreaded interview with Ella. He was, however, shown into that very room, which was the breakfast-room, where he found Mrs. Martin, alone. She rose at once, with a sad smile, and held out both her hands.

"We knew you would come," she murmured. The tears stood in her kind eyes, but the light of gratitude and kindness shone there also.

“Halford told you why I had not come before?” he answered anxiously; “you did not, I trust, believe it possible——”

She shook her head and motioned with her hand, as though to sweep away any suspicion of omission or neglect.

“There are some friends, Mr. Needham, whose truth and genuineness one cannot doubt, even though something in their conduct needs explanation; and in your case there was no such need. Your first duty under the great calamity which has befallen all of us was to your hostess, Mrs. Blythe; she, like myself, is a mother, and I can forgive her everything.”

Needham wondered, if she had known of the arrival of Mr. Sykes, if she could have forgiven her *that*, but thought it possible. Her face seemed to him as the face of an angel.

“How is your—your dear daughter?” he stammered. Something seemed to choke his utterance.

“She is hopeful, thanks in part to your kind friend, Mr. Halford; but chiefly because she does not believe that God will permit wrong to be done to an innocent man. Who that knows him

could conceive of our Robert being a murderer?"

"Who indeed?" echoed Needham fervently.

"Yes, but you are a partisan," she answered with a sad smile. "I heard that you said it would make no difference to your friendship for him whether he was guilty or innocent. I do not thank you for *that*."

"But *I* do," said a firm, sweet voice. Ella had noiselessly entered the room. She was in dark apparel, which increased the delicate beauty of her pale face. It bore traces of deep emotion, and the features themselves seemed to be more marked. What was very curious, the resemblance she had always borne to Walter Blythe—the murdered man—was more striking than ever; she might well have been his sister and in mourning for him. She held out her hand to Needham, and it trembled in his grasp less than his own.

"Yes," she said "my horizon of friendship is getting very limited, which was formerly wide enough; for I only love Robert's friends. They have slipped away from him almost all. You are one of the faithful few, Mr. Needham."

"I am afraid I have not seemed to be so,

dear Miss Ella; I should have been here yesterday."

"That has been all explained to us by Mr. Halford," she put in with a sweet smile. "He is a good advocate, I am thankful to say."

It was strange that at such a moment so loyal a heart should have felt a wound from such a source; but these words hurt Needham because they showed that the speaker was thinking of another rather than of himself.

The next instant he flushed with shame at his own weakness.

"Halford bids me say that when the hour comes I am to escort you to the court-house."

"I shall be ready," she answered quietly; "I know no one whom I would rather have to stand by my side—and by *his* side—than you."

If his life had depended upon it Needham could not have spoken. Mrs. Martin, who perceived his agitation, and doubtless guessed the cause, rose at once, and under pretence of persuading her daughter to take some breakfast, relieved his embarrassment; Ella noticed nothing. When she was not speaking, her thoughts instantly wandered away to her unhappy lover; they had

never been so much with him as during their present enforced separation. Unhappily they were mingled with remorse upon her own account. Why had she neglected his wishes and despised the advice of her mother as regarded Walter Blythe? She had seen her lover and confessed her fault, and he had said she had committed none; but in her heart of hearts, she felt that she had been to blame. Would that she was as innocent as her Robert was! The thought that she was not so was a torture only second to that she was suffering on his account. But nothing of this could be gathered from her present tone and mien. When women are brave they are very brave; and she was well aware that there was need upon her lover's account that she should this day be brave and firm.

Halford had given Needham no instructions as to what should be said to Ella upon the matter in hand. He had already spoken to her respecting the ordeal that was before her, and now doubtless thought it better to let things take their natural course. If he had had doubts of his client's innocence, he might have acted differently; but of that he had no doubt; only unhappily, very

grave ones of bringing other people to his way of thinking. The subject therefore that was agitating the minds of the two ladies and Needham was not discussed, though it of course pervaded the whole atmosphere of their conversation; only once, when the county paper was brought in, with a full report of the previous day's proceedings, was it directly alluded to.

"You do not know what has taken place so well as we do, Mr. Needham," said Mrs. Martin gently; "perhaps you had better look at this, while Ella gets ready to accompany you. It is thought better that I should not be present in the court," she added when the girl had left the room, "so you see you are indeed *in loco parentis*."

"I would die for her," exclaimed Needham, with passionate emotion.

"I know it," answered the widow quietly; "but there are more difficult things to be done for those we love in this world than to die for them;" and without another word she placed the newspaper in his trembling hands.

Therein was related at great length what Halford had told him in few words. Dr. Rushout's testimony bore heavily indeed upon the accused,

both as regards motive and intention; and other witnesses, chiefly members of the picnic party, suggested even a provocation. Grey had been seen coming from the scene of the murder within a very short time of the discovery of the body, and bearing an unusual expression of excitement; indeed, he had himself admitted that he had met Blythe upon the Downs, and parted with him after a violent quarrel.

Needham could not but acknowledge that a reader of the whole evidence, without any personal knowledge of the character of the accused, must needs think it a very strong case of suspicion; what the hearers thought of it could only be too well guessed. The report of the proceedings, though written with some pretence of caution, was in the modern style, and lent itself a good deal to sensation. It was easy to read between the lines that the general impression was very unfavourable to the prisoner. The landlady of "the Bell," who had seen Grey passing through the inn-yard on his return, and witnessed to his "wild looks," took occasion to indulge in a tearful eulogy upon her favourite Walter Blythe, which was greeted with "applause." The proceedings generally

were conducted in a looser manner than is usual even in "crowner's quests," and the effect of this upon the accused was to his disadvantage; public sympathy, though Grey had been hitherto more popular than his rival, was now unmistakably on the other side. Halford had hinted as much, and doubtless entertained some hopes of Ella's evidence stemming or turning the tide; but she had received no official summons to appear. Indeed, when, an hour or so later, word was brought for her, it was only sent to her through Needham; perhaps the coroner thought her evidence unnecessary, and wished to spare her.

She came down at once; kissed her mother without a word—words, as they both knew, would have been dangerous and might have brought down (as on some Alpine height) an avalanche—and turned to Needham. A sad smile, which seemed to say "I am ready for the worst," could be seen through her thin veil, but no semblance of a tear. If, when he offered her his arm, as they went up the street to the court house, she leaned upon it a little, he knew that it was a sign of confidence in him, and no proof of weakness. Nevertheless, it must have been distressing indeed

for her. Even to Needham, the pushing through that eagerly gazing but silent crowd round the inn door, and the entrance into the crowded court house, were incidents to be remembered to his dying day. The last time he had seen it was in the company of the murdered man; it had then been lone and empty, and difficult to picture otherwise. Now even the little gallery, where Blythe had told him the fiddlers sat at the assembly balls, was filled to overflowing.

The place had been hastily transformed into a judicial chamber, with a box for the jury, and a dock for the prisoner. Grey had been standing there with his arms folded and a face full of resolution and contemptuous calm; but when he caught sight of the new-comers it softened. To Ella he gave an encouraging smile, to Needham a grateful one, and then his hands sought the rail in front of him and held on to it. It was the first time since his trial began that he had felt the need of support.

The bench beside the coroner was crowded with the local gentry. Needham recognized some of them as having been at the picnic on the island, especially Mr. Hardacre, who had issued

the warrant for Grey's apprehension. How different they all looked to him now; no smiles and bows and small talk, but a grave and eager attention on every face, not unmixed in many cases with pity.

Seats had been reserved for Needham and Ella close to Mr. Fanshawe and Halford (looking quite another person in his wig and gown); and as the crowd made way for them a whisper of interest and sympathy arose from it. Mr. Sykes, the eminent counsellor on the other side, observed it, and caused his mobile countenance to express similar emotions, but supplemented it with a significant shake of his head. "As belonging to the great human family," said the shake, "we must feel pity for this poor girl, but we must not allow it to overcome our sense of justice."

"Would it very much upset her to give evidence do you think?" whispered Halford to Needham. "The coroner will not press it."

"It will not upset her; she has made up her mind to it; you may depend on her to state everything that has occurred as regards Blythe without reserve."

"Then I shall not call her," was the unexpected reply. "Let Sykes call her if he chooses."

This was apparently what that gentleman was about to do, for at that very moment he settled his gown upon his shoulders with the professional shrug, and addressed the coroner, keeping his eyes intently fixed upon the lady in question.

"We have now, sir, very nearly arrived at the end of the inquiry; the hour is almost arrived for the adjournment of the court" (here the jurymen all nodded, for this meant luncheon time), "after which we shall hear what my learned friend has to say on behalf of his client. But it strikes me that some light may be still thrown on the matter by a gentleman who has not, I believe, been summoned, and whom I see for the first time in court. With your permission, I propose to put Mr. George Needham into the witness box."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE WITNESS-BOX.

MR. SYKES' concluding words were evidently a great disappointment to the whole audience, who had expected quite another name; and, indeed, at a whisper from Mr. Fanshawe, Ella had already removed her glove for the purpose of being sworn. Halford threw a smile at the jury, quite as significant as Mr. Sykes' shake of the head. "I am not so surprised as you are," the smile said; "for I think my learned friend has very good reasons for preferring a witness who knows little of this sad matter to a witness who knows everything, and could confute him."

Needham entered the box at once, and, in spite of himself, could not help casting a glance at Grey.

"Be so good as to look at *me*," said Mr. Sykes, rebukefully.

Halford smiled again. This time with genuine

amusement. The way in which Mr. Sykes had "bossed the show" as Mr. Fanshawe had expressed it, from the first moment of his arrival was very remarkable. The poor coroner had almost surrendered the reins of administration into the hands of this doughty counsel. It is mostly "go as you please" in a coroner's court, but things had gone for the last few hours only as Mr. Sykes pleased. Halford could have pulled him up, and would have done so sharply enough on more than one occasion, if he had seen his advantage in so doing; but on the whole, the impression produced by Mr. Sykes' arrogance was greater than that produced by his eloquence. The jury quailed before it, but they resented it.

"You are a Fellow of St. Neot's College, Cambridge, I believe?"

"I am."

"But you were formerly at St. Boniface, where both the accused and the deceased were undergraduates with you?"

"I was."

"And you knew them both; the deceased, I believe, very intimately?"

"I did not know Walter Blythe until after I had left St. Boniface."

"Indeed. But afterwards you came to be on more familiar terms with him?"

"Not on more familiar terms than with Robert Grey."

"We see that. It is plain on which side your sympathies lie, Mr. Needham. Let us leave the prisoner out of the question for the moment, if you please. You did become more familiar with Walter Blythe? You visited him at his house? You are at present, I believe, staying under his mother's roof; the mother of the murdered man?"

"I am."

"He treated you at all events, of late, as an intimate friend. Made you the confidant of his secret wishes, his dearest hopes?"

"No; I cannot say that."

"But you must say it if it is true."

"It is not true."

"What! Are you prepared to swear that he did not talk to you of his love affairs, for example?"

"He had no love affairs, speaking generally, so far as I know."

"Speaking generally. Let us be a little more particular then. You were at this picnic the other day, I believe?"

"I was."

"The prisoner at the bar expressed in your presence—as in that of others who have already given evidence to that effect—his irritation and anger that the young lady to whom he was engaged to be married had gone out in a boat alone with the deceased."

"He had not gone out alone; Dr. Rushout was with them."

"We know all about that. Dr. Rushout, as perhaps you are not aware, has already been before us. Now why was it that when you thought you were alone in the wood at the end of the island that you waved your handkerchief to Walter Blythe and the young lady?"

"I did so because, though I saw no harm in the matter, I felt that their return without Dr. Rushout would annoy Grey, and I therefore signalled to them to land at the wood instead of the usual landing place."

"And Miss Martin did land there, and you

took her place in the boat with Blythe in order to avoid suspicion?"

"If you choose to put it in that way, yes."

"I do choose to put it in that way, sir; and I now ask you on your oath whether in your opinion Walter Blythe was not in love with Miss Ella Martin though she was engaged to Robert Grey?"

"I object to that question altogether," said Halford vehemently.

"And yet it is a very simple one," remarked Mr. Sykes, looking towards the coroner.

"In a preliminary inquiry such as the present," hesitated the coroner, "I think it permissible."

"If you admit that the question would not be allowed in a court of law, I have nothing to say, sir," observed Halford drily; "but I object to the word 'preliminary,' which suggests what ought not to be suggested."

"Now, then, Mr. Needham, let us have no fencing if you please," resumed the counsel. "I ask you whether in your opinion the deceased was not in love with Miss Martin?"

"He admired her no doubt."

"Most persons must do so who have had the pleasure of seeing her," said Mr. Sykes; "but that is not the question, nor my question. You admire her yourself, no doubt, but will you swear that the deceased was not attached to her in a much more devoted manner."

"Yes, I will; in my opinion Walter Blythe was no more in love with the young lady in question than I was."

"Then, if you swear that, I decline to ask you anything more," said Mr. Sykes, with forensic indignation. "You may stand down, sir."

The Court here adjourned for an hour.

"That was a good answer you gave Sykes," said Halford approvingly.

"I felt ashamed at having to give it, and in that poor girl's presence, too," replied Needham ruefully. "Still, it was the literal truth."

"And had just the effect we wanted it to have," observed the barrister; "though he put it into your mouth himself. As soon as she has had a few words with Grey, Fanshawe here is going to convey Miss Martin back to 'The Fishery' because, for a particular reason, I want you to lunch with me."

"She will not be called, I hope; it would be a terrible ordeal for her."

"I think she will not. Sykes is evidently afraid of her. But I am not sure whether I shall not want you in the box again for a few minutes."

"I am quite at your service," said Needham, mechanically. He was watching poor Ella, as she stood beside the dock with both her lover's hands in hers, and unconscious of the many eyes fixed on them, though the room was emptying fast.

"I want you, Needham, for the sake of those two unhappy young people," said Halford earnestly, "to withdraw your thoughts for the meantime from them and all concerning them; I want you to keep your mind clear and cool for a special purpose. It is possible—just possible—that on your next appearance in that box may hang the fate of Robert Grey, and I need not say whose fate besides."

"On my appearance? What can *I* say, alas! more than I have already said?"

Halford shrugged his shoulders. "It may be

something or nothing, but I believe there is a chance for us."

"You mean for Grey? Are things going so very badly against him, then?"

"Yes; they could not possibly go worse with an innocent man. However, as I have said, put all that out of your mind. Let us talk together for the next hour, as we used to do in the old days at St. Neot's."

"How very, very old they seem, how long ago!" sighed Needham.

"They do; but let us revive them. My dear Captain" he addressed a tall soldierly looking man who stood near them—"you have not forgotten your engagement to lunch with me to-day. This is my friend, Captain Mitchell, Needham, the head of the County Police."

CHAPTER XX.

A LITTLE SCIENCE.

AFTER the period devoted to luncheon the court house was fuller than ever. It was generally supposed that the case would close in a very short time, and the jury be called upon to give their verdict. As to what that verdict would be there was indeed but little doubt, but the arrival of the supreme moment was looked forward to with intense expectancy.

Ella indeed was no longer there; but the accused, of course, was present, lacking nothing of the courage and confidence he had throughout exhibited, and the interest of that spectacle was absorbing. Now that his doom seemed approaching, pity for the noble-looking young fellow, whom all had known and liked so long, began to get the upper hand. Many of the women were in tears.

"You wished to put a question, I understand,

Mr. Halford, to the last witness?" observed the coroner.

"Presently, if you please, sir. But, in the meantime, I ask that Dr. Rushout may be recalled."

The doctor, looking very grave and sad, reappeared in the witness box accordingly.

"You told us yesterday, Dr. Rushout, that the wound on the head of the deceased was at the top of it—'a very peculiar spot,' you added, 'as the result of violence.'"

"Yes. I can hardly imagine its infliction, supposing he was upright, except from a person much his superior in height, or who stood on higher ground."

"And it was a very deep wound, such as must have been caused by extreme violence?"

"It must, indeed. The head must have been uncovered; indeed, the deceased was seen from below, walking bareheaded, with his round hat in his hand."

"The stone that caused his death, you think, could not have been thrown."

"I think not; it must have been held in the hand and used as a hammer."

"Or dropped from above?"

"If that had been possible, yes; but there is no elevation near the spot on which the murderer could have taken his stand."

"That will do. Captain Mitchell, will you be so kind as to step into the box?"

"That stone in your hand, the stone with which the murder is proved to have been committed, has never left your custody?"

"Never; it was in your hand a few minutes ago, and in the hand of Mr. Needham, but it was never out of my sight, nor has it been out of it except when it was locked up."

"I think we all know that stone pretty well," said the coroner, smiling.

"Very well, sir. Then I now recall Mr. Needham. You are a student of mineralogy, I believe; have been so for years?"

"Yes."

"You have specimens in your cabinet similar to the stone you now hold in your hand?"

"I have several such specimens."

"Have you any doubt whatever as to the nature of the stone?"

"Not the slightest; no one with even the most

elementary knowledge of mineralogy could entertain a doubt."

"You can swear to its character and genus?"

"Most certainly. It is a meteoric stone."

A murmur of amazement ran round the persons on the bench.

"Be good enough for the benefit of the jury to describe what a meteoric stone *is*."

It was curious; but directly this question was put to Needham the tumult of his mind, which had been agitated by the most vehement emotions was for the moment stilled. He was transformed, like the counsel, into a professional machine. Here was something tangible before him, the nature of which he thoroughly understood. He was no longer drifting on a sea of possibilities, cautious of his replies and doubtful of their consequences. He felt exactly as though he was in his own room at St. Neot's, discoursing on the contents of his little mineralogical cabinet to inquiring friends. He had done so on more than one occasion to Halford, and it was solely owing to that circumstance that that gentleman, who knew nothing of such matters, had recognized in the stone a likeness to those which

had been pointed out to him by his friend as meteorites.

It had only occurred to him that very day, and he had devised his little luncheon party for the express purpose of getting Needham's scientific opinion on the matter in the presence of Captain Mitchell. Needham had only to recapitulate what he had then stated without the least suspicion of the importance of his verdict. Halford had said, *à propos* of nothing in particular, "By the bye, this stone was picked up the other day near Mapleton; what is it, Needham?" If things turned out as he hoped, he felt that the effect of that undesigned reply in the presence of the captain would be of the utmost service to his client; and, indeed, so it proved. There was not a man in court at that moment more certain of the prisoner's innocence than the head of the constabulary.

It is probable that no scientific lecture ever delivered was listened to with such breathless interest as was Needham's explanation of the nature of a meteoric stone. That "special variety of the Felspar group called Anorthite" excited more attention than if it had been the Kohinoor;

and, moreover, it had an unusually practical effect upon the audience.

"The long and short of it is," observed a jurymen (who perhaps meant "the long" of it, for a little science goes a great way with some people); "you are sure and sartain that this stone fell from Heaven."

"I am quite sure, at all events, that it fell from above."

"Then that settles me for one," said the jurymen; "the prisoner wasn't a h'angel, and couldn't ha dropped it."

"We are all of us pretty much of your opinion," observed the others. The jury-box had become musical, or, at least, vocal and harmonious.

"You had better leave the room and consider your verdict," said the coroner, scandalised.

"There is no occasion for our leaving the room," observed the foreman, "we are agreed."

"I would like to say on behalf of those for whom I act," said Mr. Sykes, "that in this prosecution there has been no motive of malignity, and that nothing would give them greater pleasure than to find the prisoner at the bar innocent of

what we had all believed to be a most terrible crime."

At this there was great applause. It was plain indeed that all was over as regarded the trial *except* the shouting. There was only one difficulty; a single jurymen stood out for "by the visitation of God" (a phrase that had much taken his fancy) instead of "accidental death;" but here the coroner came in very useful; for he pointed out how such a verdict might seem to reflect upon the deceased, and would undoubtedly hurt the feelings of a widowed mother, who had already enough to bear. There are so many things that admit of delicate consideration in a "preliminary inquiry," which are lost sight of in the mephitic atmosphere of the higher Courts.

No sooner was the verdict delivered than, amidst tumultuous cheering, the occupants of the bench, including its head, streamed down to offer their sincere congratulations to the acquitted man.

But Robert Grey drew himself up, and said, with the dignity that had never forsaken him, "I thank you, gentlemen, but my hand is reserved for those only who have never thought me capable of a base and cowardly crime. To you

first, Needham, who have saved my honour, and perhaps my life; and next to you, Halford."

It was a speech which, so far as his Mapleton friends were concerned, he afterwards repented of, and which was forgiven him. As poor Mr. Hardacre observed, "How the deuce could he help issuing a warrant against a man when everything on earth looked black for him, and the only witness in his favour out of the heavens had not yet been examined." Dr. Rushout, too, felt himself hardly treated, for he had run a great risk for Grey, and had only told the truth under compulsion. But this resentment, if it could be called such, did not last; allowance was justly made for the feelings of a proud spirit falsely accused; and before a week elapsed Robert Grey was the most popular man in the county. In the village itself he was already the idol of the hour.

The noise of the cheering of the people was borne on the summer wind to "The Fishery," and made a heaven of home before the news itself could reach them. If the verdict had gone against their dear one they had known their neighbours too long to believe they would have cheered *that*. They did not need the sight of Grey himself,

walking arm in arm with Halford, and followed by the shouting crowd, to tell them that he had left the court house a free man, without a stain. In a few words, after a fond embrace, and a few thankful tears from Ella, Grey explained what had happened.

"Then where is Mr. Needham?" she said. "Why is he not here, Mr. Halford, that I may thank him as he deserves, and with my whole heart, as I thank *you*?"

"Well you see, my dear Miss Ella, Needham is a modest man, not a lawyer like me; and I think he was rather afraid of your thanks. Moreover, he bade me say that, as he could be of no further use here, he thought he ought to return to Stretton Park at once, and tell Mrs. Blythe exactly what has happened. She has been labouring under a cruel mistake which he thinks ought to be rectified, for her own sake, and in a proper manner."

"If anything could give me a higher opinion of Mr. Needham than that I already entertain," said Mrs. Martin earnestly, "it would be what you have just told me of him."

"Still, he might have allowed himself the

pleasure of seeing us made so happy by his own act," observed Ella regretfully.

"Needham is a man who never allows himself a pleasure, my darling," said Grey gravely, "while it is in his power to do others a service. I wish I was one-half as good a man."

Ella looked up at him, as at some divine apostle, who was depreciating himself from the best of motives; and Halford, observing it, was glad that Needham had not come.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW THEY FARED.

PROMPTLY as Needham took his way to Stretton Park, rumour had arrived there before him. By an unlucky chance, some girl who had business Stretton way, and who had left the court just before the verdict, had anticipated him. She had heard the words, "By the visitation of God," fall from the juryman's lips, and had concluded that it *was* the verdict. The news was brought to his unhappy hostess, and, on her morbid mind, already weighted to the uttermost, produced the

very impression the coroner had been so charitably anxious to avoid. It had broken down under the strain, and henceforth knew neither trouble nor regret. If human hand had been proved to have struck down her son she could, perhaps, have borne it; could at least have seen justice done on the offender; but since Heaven itself had done it—for his sins perchance—all indeed was over. Some thought of this kind, as was surmised, passed through the poor lady's brain and paralysed it for ever.

She lived on for years, surrounded, of course, by every comfort, and at least dead to regret.

Needham returned to Cambridge without paying a visit to "The Fishery;" but Grey came over to the Park and had a long and affectionate interview with him. He brought a letter from Ella "to be read, my dear fellow, when you are alone," and which Needham prized beyond all his earthly possessions.

"Next to Robert and my mother," she wrote, "you will always have the warmest place in my heart." This was not quite so, because in due time there came a little stranger, called Needham Grey, who ousted him even from that

third place; but he was quite content. Grey had learnt from Mrs. Martin exactly how matters stood, and did not press his coming to the marriage.

"Time," she said, "will heal all; but you must give him time." And her prophecy was fulfilled. At Cambridge, chiefly through Halford's judicious management, he gradually fell into social life, and resumed his old studies with even greater ardour than before. "Nobody, my dear Needham," said the good Professor, "can ever say, after your performance at that inquest, that mineralogy is 'no good,' whatever may be said against geology;" and Needham distinguished himself not a little in that branch of science. He was one of the invited guests, we may be sure, to Penelope's marriage with the "Master," which took place before the autumn leaves were falling, and some months before Grey and Ella were made one.

The latter, though, womanlike, she had borne up so well while there was need for calmness and for courage, had suffered when the tension upon her feelings had been relaxed. It was many months, therefore, before her wedding took

place, and many more before she came to Cambridge—the scene of her husband's triumphs—and made the other bride's acquaintance. Dr. Martell won her heart by the way in which he spoke of Needham, but at first a good deal embarrassed her by his method of alluding to his previous matrimonial experiences.

“Speaking of brunettes,” he said, “reminds me of my dear wife——”

“But surely,” interrupted Ella, “you do not call Mrs. Martell a brunette?”

“Well, no;” he admitted, “when I say my wife I mean my first wife,” which astonished Ella, whom her husband had omitted to prepare for it, not a little.

Of Phœbe, however, the master's first “beloved object,” he never so much as breathed a word to anybody, and we may be sure that Needham and Halford kept his secret. The latter became so enamoured of college life, that, though his great talents were useless to him in an academical sense, and only procured him an ordinary degree, he took up his residence at Cambridge. If it had been within the power of the Master and Fellows of St. Neot's they would

certainly have elected him on its foundation; but even the easy rules of that pleasant little college did not admit of that amount of stretching; though this did not much signify, as Halford was seldom absent from its hall. This was a great boon to Needham, and had much influence in restoring his peace of mind.

On the arrival of his little namesake at "The Fishery," where the young couple resided with Mrs. Martin, Needham was prevailed upon to stand as his sponsor. Never was godfather (of moderate means) made half so much of. He loved Ella as much as ever—not in poor Walter Blythe's way, but in honest and unselfish fashion; and with a devotion so monopolising that he never turned eyes of love on another woman. As Halford said of him, "the Sizar" (as some of his contemporaries at the university used superciliously to speak of him) was not, perhaps, such an interesting person as the two others of that triumvirate of friends. Blythe, indeed, was a remarkable character, save for that last slip of his (which, however, revealed a good many possibilities of falling lower). He was born to be admired and even loved by his fellow-crea-

tures; to quote a remark made upon a much better known member of society, "one liked him so much more than one's judgment approved of him;" without effort, but not without intention, he made the world happier by his presence, and was sincerely and widely regretted. "Who knows, O Creator," says the French poet, in his apology for Napoleon, "whether genius be not one of Thy virtues?" and the same question may be asked, perhaps, concerning geniality and the art of pleasing.

As to Grey, he came to be described as "brilliant" in another sense; he applied himself to scholarship, and became an authority on the digamma and similar mysteries. The short but strange experience of unmerited misfortune he had undergone was not without its influence, perhaps, in rendering him averse to active life, and prone to learned ease. The "Stumble on the Threshold" of his life had no ill effect on it, but perhaps rather the contrary.

THE END.

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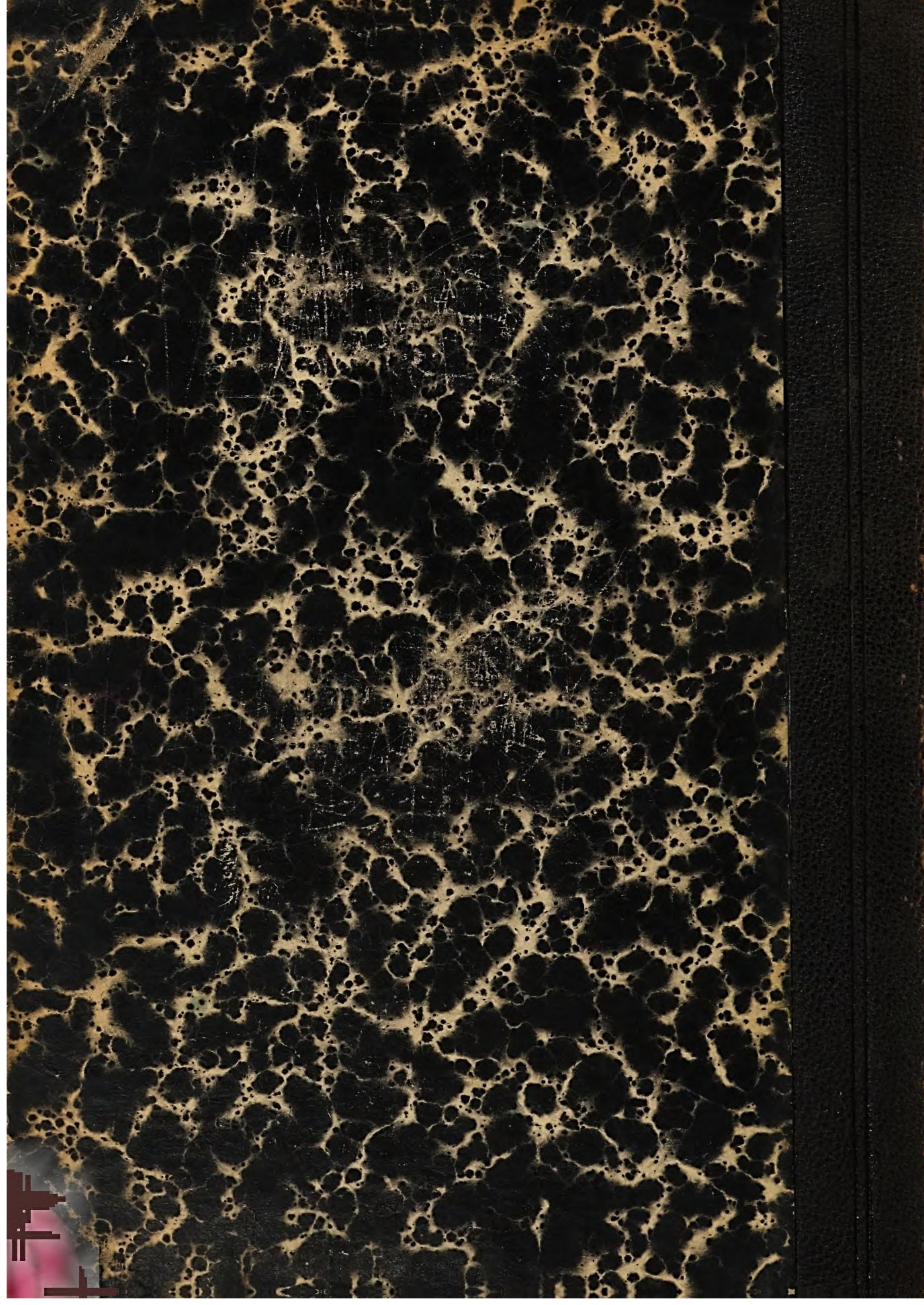
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